

Title: Wind That Shakes the Seas and Stars

<http://lightningwave.livejournal.com/77700.html>

By Lightning on the Wave

Summary: AU of OoTP, Slytherin!Harry, HPDM slash. Snape begins the year with a mistake that sets his ward against him.

Now Harry is using all his own considerable cunning to ride out the multiple storms, even as the Second War goes into motion.

Notes: This is the fifth story in what I call the Sacrifices Arc, following Freedom and Not Peace. It's therefore not going to make much sense if you haven't read the first four. By this time, the differences from canon are pronounced, and while there are nods to OoTP here and there in this story, its plot is not much like OoTP's.

Warnings: Violence, language, **torture** (both physical and mental), **child abuse** (in memories), heavy angst, twisted psychology, slash and het and saffic (femmeslash) in varying degrees of explicitness, **multiple character deaths** (both canon and OC's, both good and bad guys, both minor and major characters).

Wind That Shakes The Seas and Stars

*Wind wherein seas and stars are shaken
Shall shake them, and they shall not waken;
None that has lain down shall arise;*

*The stones are sealed across their places;
One shadow is shed on all their faces,
One blindness cast on all their eyes.
-Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Ilicet."*

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Chapter One: Breeding Basilisks

Harry dreamed.

He was once again in the cavernous house he had seen in his visions earlier that year. He could feel his whiskers twitching, and knew he was once more in the lynx form he'd adopted in the other visions.

So cling to any familiarity you can find, he thought, as he lifted his head and felt his scar burst into pain. *Fight your way through the agony, fight your way through the knowledge that Voldemort is back. You have to survive, so you might as well fight.*

He took a step forward, and nearly tipped over. He had forgotten that his left forepaw was missing, victim of Bellatrix's cut just as his left hand had been. Harry forced himself to work through the feelings that wanted him to lash his tail and squall. He could not afford to be enraged right now—or ever, in truth. He thought of unicorns, and light, and crept forward until he could see around the divan that stood in front of him.

The first thing he saw was the fire burning in the center of the floor, pulsing like a heartbeat and sending flares and ripples of light and shadow through the room. It was more red than orange, and more gold than either, and it spread out in a strange pool beneath a squat yellow shape that it took Harry some moments to identify. When he did, he felt his mouth pull up in a snarl.

An egg.

He heard Voldemort's laughter, and backed hastily behind the divan again just as the Dark Lord strode into sight, his robes fluttering around him and his lipless mouth stretched in a smile. He was not sure if Voldemort could see him in visions like this, but he simply couldn't take the chance. Once again, he calmed his breathing, and called up the training that Lily had given him when she told him he might become a spy in the wars. *See everything. Remember everything. You never know what might be useful.*

Harry had to know if that egg was really what he suspected it was, and so he stayed still as Voldemort turned to speak to something or someone he couldn't see. "Come here. Come here and fulfill your duty." The Dark Lord broke into laughter again halfway through the words, as if he found them funny. Harry didn't see why until the person he was talking about moved into sight.

It wasn't actually a person, or even people, but a group of snakes, gleaming black and green and red. They wrapped themselves around the egg and began to massage it. Harry saw the fire gleam in their scales dully for a few moments.

Then they burned.

Harry shuddered as he heard hissing cries of pain, odd words that were probably as close as snakes could come to obscenities, and the sharp crackle of scales and flesh crisping in the flames. Nevertheless, even as some of the serpents fell dying to the floor, others took their place, and the ones who were lucky enough to be high up on the egg, away from the fire, went on massaging, hissing, writhing, as if they could rub their own bodies into the shell.

Voldemort went on watching, his mouth twisted in a half-smile. When he spoke again, it was in a language Harry didn't know, but the words seemed to sear themselves into his brain. They were ugly sounds, with a hook on the end of them. Harry thought of speaking them himself, and felt the fur stand up on his spine.

Four words—and Harry hated being able to tell that, hated the fact that he thought he could recall this language if he had to—and the snakes abruptly lay still. The fire flared and leaped, wrapping the egg in molten gold and obscuring the sight of the serpents. Voldemort laughed again, a fevered sound of high-pitched excitement, and Harry's scar deepened into agony that made his vision blacken.

He could feel the magic dancing madly through the room. It coiled back on itself like a serpent, and then sank cold, poisoned fangs of power into the egg. That killed Harry's hope, if he'd had any, that the Dark Lord was anything less than fully recovered from the memory loss and mental damage that Harry had managed to inflict on him.

The flame and the magic combined with each other, whirled around in an embrace, and dissipated. What remained was the egg, a gleaming red-gold shape that Harry could not find beautiful, despite its resemblance in color to Fawkes. It looked more like swirls of blood floating in urine.

Voldemort spoke one more hook-like word, and yanked his hand backward. The eggshell splintered at once, as if pulled from outside rather than smashed from within, and a lithe, wriggling black shape poured through the rent and into the world.

Harry half-closed his eyes as he watched the young basilisk dance, its deep green scales still wet from the egg fluid. He wasn't sure how deadly the snakes could be when newborn, or even if its gaze would work on him in a vision, but he wasn't about to take the chance. There would be less taking of chances, less sacrifices, from now on, he promised himself. He *had* to live to fight this war.

Voldemort walked around the basilisk and spoke to it in what Harry knew must be Parseltongue; the snake stilled at once upon hearing his voice. "So beautiful, my young one. You will listen to me. You will keep your false eyelids upon your eyes when you are near anyone belonging to me, whom you may know by this Mark." He spun one hand, and the Dark Mark, flaring green, took form in the air above him. "You will not bite anyone bearing this Mark, either. All others are your rightful prey when you are grown and unleashed upon my enemies."

The basilisk raised its head—or her head, Harry saw, since she was missing the scarlet plumes that would have identified her as a king basilisk. "*I am hungry. Obedient, but hungry. Bring me one whom I may eat, my master.*"

Voldemort let out a lazy laugh, and looked over his shoulder. Two masked Death Eaters came from the shadows, and they held a struggling creature between them that turned Harry's heart to a stone.

It should have been impossible for them to capture a unicorn foal. How in the world did they do it?

The foal was purely golden, marking it as less than two years old. Its eyes were large and a shifting deep color, somewhere between purple and deep blue. It thrashed and kept on thrashing, the movements of a purely wild and free being made to endure no captivity.

Harry moved a step forward. It didn't matter if he would be seen, if he was in danger from the vision itself or the basilisk or Voldemort. He had hidden once while he watched the Dark Lord slaughter a unicorn. He would not hide so again.

He sprang from behind the divan, his claws on his right front paw unsheathed, letting the pressure from his hind legs drive him—

And passed through the basilisk as if through a ghost. Harry landed on the floor beyond, and it felt solid. Perhaps he had missed his strike. He turned, planting his hind feet and spinning to hook his front paw into one of the advancing Death Eaters' robes.

They passed across his fur like smoke.

Frantic now, Harry tried to reach out to the unicorns, the free ones who must be singing in horror at what was happening to one of their own. *Do you see this happening? Why aren't you here? Free him! Come on! Where the fuck are you?*

No response came, and the basilisk was edging forward, her long fangs bared and her head slowly turning so that Harry, standing in front of the unicorn, would be within her deadly yellow gaze in a moment.

Harry reached out with all his willpower, pouring magic and strength through himself, trying to open a conduit through his body to the vision and provide a shining wall of defense and protection for the foal. He was *good* at defensive magic. He'd certainly trained long enough for it. He had to be able to save the foal now. He'd seen one child lost to Voldemort's people already, and that was enough.

Nothing happened. The Death Eaters dropped the unicorn hastily to the ground, and the basilisk struck, coiling her body around the foal and sinking her fangs home. The foal trembled and let out a thin scream. His legs thrashed once, and then he was still, blue-silver blood leaking from the holes in his neck as the basilisk turned him around and began to swallow him headfirst.

Voldemort was laughing.

Harry crouched where he was, able to see everything but unable to be seen or interact with it, disbelieving, shaky, horrified.

What changed? Why should I have been able to hurt and kill Nagini before, but I can't stop Voldemort's other snakes now?

The only possible answer Harry could come up with was that Voldemort's resurrection had somehow altered the link between them. It would protect him, but at the same time, it would damn anyone in the position of innocent sacrifice.

Harry hated—well. He was not sure what he hated most at the moment, Voldemort or the situation or himself. He crouched where he was, and hissed hisses that no one paid attention to, and hated. He watched the basilisk eat the unicorn, drinking the blood that would taint her, if she were not already so, and bind her even more firmly to Voldemort.

He imagined the unicorns who had carried him into the sea yesterday morning, searching in vain for the golden foal the Death Eaters had taken, and wished he could vomit.

Voldemort caressed the basilisk's head and murmured to her, in words that Harry could have understood but did not care to. He flattened his ears and his whiskers and stared at the floor. *Is this going to happen in every vision from now on?*

Then he shook his head. He should not be concentrating on this now. He had had to deal with grief and hatred and self-loathing enough in the past few days that he should be used to them. The important thing was what he could get out of the visions, since he could not stop having them, and he might as well use his invulnerability to his advantage. He glanced at the Death Eaters, but they retained their masks, and they gave no betraying gestures that might mark them as those whom Harry knew well.

Voldemort turned to them and spoke in high, cold English. "Call upon our contacts in the Ministry. And call upon Fenrir Greyback. He smelled his way to Tullianum prison once before. He can do so again."

One of the Death Eaters bowed low before he spoke. Harry twitched a tufted ear, but could hear nothing familiar in his voice, still. "My lord, are we to free all of the Death Eater prisoners we can find? If we are pressed for time, who should be our priority?"

"All of them, of course," said Voldemort peevishly. Harry glanced up at his white face, and found it twisted into a *why do I surround myself with these idiots?* expression.

Because only idiots will agree to have a skull and snake branded into their flesh and conduct senseless raids on the Muggle and wizarding worlds? Harry thought. *Well, idiots and people who are acting as sacrifices for their friends and people who've repented and decided that, yes, they were in fact idiots.* He found it comforting to think about Peter and his allies at a time like this, and Snape—

No, not Snape. He wasn't allowed to think of him, or he would weaken. Carefully, Harry willed thoughts like that out of his head, and tried to listen for something he thought might make the unicorn's death worth it.

"But if you must choose," Voldemort continued, "free Walden Macnair first."

The Death Eaters bowed to him and Apparated away. Harry felt his dream dissolving, and doubted he would see anything more interesting anyway, as Voldemort was simply stroking the queen basilisk and murmuring soothing words to his pet.

I have seen quite enough, he thought, as he turned and vanished among the dissolving shreds of dream, back into reality.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. His body felt, oddly, as though he really had been taking springs and leaps with it, but he supposed the intense physical nature of the dream, or his own exhaustion, might have something to do with that. He blinked away the blood he had expected to be pouring from his scar, and found Draco leaning over him, eyes so intense they hurt.

“Are you all right?” Draco asked, very softly.

Harry nodded once, and then winced as that set his scar off like a brand again. He sat up carefully. “Do you have a parchment and quill?” he asked, flexing his right hand. Then he flexed the glamour of the left, trying to mimic the natural bends and motions of his actual appendage. It was harder than he thought it would be, especially since he had to do it in a mirrored way and not simply replicate the movements.

Draco lifted a quill and a scroll silently from beside his chair. Harry, holding his head so that blood didn’t drip on the parchment and pinning the side of the paper with his left wrist, wrote as simple and short a note to Scrimgeour as he could, warning him to guard Walden Macnair with extra precautions and watch for Death Eaters trying to find their way into the new, hidden Ministry prison.

By the time he looked up from the paper, Fawkes was already sitting on the back of Draco’s chair, crooning softly. Harry blinked at him. “But wouldn’t you burn the paper to ashes?” he asked.

The phoenix gave a sharp chirp, and in Harry’s head formed the vision of an owl swooping awkwardly and crashing into a wall. That made Harry smile, briefly. Fawkes was saying that accidents could happen with owl post, too, but that most wizards still trusted their messages to the birds.

Fawkes picked up the parchment in his beak and vanished into a ball of flames. Harry leaned back and closed his eyes. *Wherever Scrimgeour is, that note will probably reach him in time. I don’t think that the new wards the Ministry put on Tullianum will let Greyback sniff his way right in as he could last time.*

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes. “Yes, Draco? I’m definitely not asleep. I’m not sure I’ll sleep the rest of the night.”

“The Dark Lord’s recovered from whatever it was that you did to him?” Draco sat plucking at the sheet, staring at the floor.

“Yes,” said Harry simply.

Draco’s hands clenched around the sheet, hard enough to make it shift on Harry’s legs. “I wish he hadn’t,” he said. “I wish he’d died.”

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. It wasn’t really the wish that surprised him, and he could hardly scold Draco for wishing Voldemort dead if he were going to wish anyone like that. It was the intensity in Draco’s voice, the same kind that had been there when he essentially swore vengeance on Bellatrix Lestrange for cutting off Harry’s hand.

Harry reached out and gently touched Draco’s wrist. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Draco snorted, a desperate sound of laughter and hatred both at once, and then lifted his head. “Shouldn’t *I* be asking *you* that?” he demanded, leaning forward until his nose was inches from Harry’s face.

Harry shrugged and rubbed absently at the blood on his cheeks, using the glamour of his left hand before he thought about it. Not dry yet, he noticed, as the liquid smeared on his sleeve. No point in cleaning his face yet, then. The scar would go on bleeding for a while.

“I think we can both ask each other that,” he said. “I know that it hurts you to see me suffering like this.”

“But you’re the one who looks like you’ve been through the wars.” Draco took a deep breath. “And it’s only going to get worse, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Harry didn’t see the need to add anything else. He knew what Draco was struggling with, in silence. Being in love with him would take a toll. Being at his side even as a friend would take a toll. Harry didn’t think he had the right to make Draco’s decision for him. If he chose to withdraw—

Harry’s feelings twisted in panic, and he sat on them.

--then he chose to withdraw. He had to do what his will and his heart inclined him to do, what would keep him safe if safety was more important than anything else.

Draco looked up just then, into his eyes, and let out a harsh, exasperated breath. Then he grabbed Harry around the middle, hard enough to make Harry jump a bit in surprise and set up a throb of pain through his sore muscles. “Stop that,” he murmured fiercely into Harry’s ear. “I’m not going to abandon you. I’m never going to. I love you, I told you that, and you are part of my life, and if you try to force me away from you—body-binds and sleeping spells, remember?”

“You said that was only if I went into danger without you,” Harry muttered, but he allowed himself to relax and return the embrace as best he could. Draco was pinning his arms, and he couldn’t move them very far.

“Trying to fight this war by yourself would count.” Draco leaned as close to Harry as he could. “I love you, and *Merlin* you’re stubborn, and you are *going* to come to Malfoy Manor with me for the summer.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. *He’s too Slytherin for his own good, sometimes. I might have agreed to that if I weren’t listening so closely.* He gently pushed at Draco, forcing him to loosen his hold a bit. “We’ve already talked about that. I told you why I couldn’t. I would ask that—“

“Where would you go, then?” Draco demanded, his eyes narrowing. “You can’t stay with Snape, and if you suggest actually going to your parents, I’ll—“

“Use a Body-Bind or a sleeping spell, I know.” Harry frowned at him. “I have another solution.” He paused, reaching out instinctively for Fawkes to warn him if Dumbledore was listening, and then remembered that Fawkes was gone, delivering the message to Scrimgeour. Harry shook his head and lowered his voice, leaning close to Draco. “I was thinking McGonagall. She already knows more than I wanted her to, but she wouldn’t be dangerous to me the way that your father would, and she’s capable of protecting me.”

“If you stay in the same school as Snape and Dumbledore, what will happen?” Draco held his eyes, and did not look away.

“Snape I can ignore,” said Harry. He was certain of it now. The wild anger that had driven him on Midsummer night, and which he thought now his compulsion from Dumbledore might have influenced, had fled him. “And it’s necessary that I stay near the Headmaster. If anything can bring him to redemption and to consider his mistakes, then I think that being near me might do it.”

“What are you talking about, Harry?”

Harry jerked; he couldn’t help it, though he thought part of the movement came from Draco’s startlement as well as his own. He lifted his head, slowly, and looked over Draco’s shoulder towards the doors of the hospital wing.

His mother was standing there, her eyes wide, her head slowly shaking back and forth. Harry couldn’t decide if she looked mad or not, but he knew that he didn’t like the expression on her face when she gazed at him.

“You’re coming back to Godric’s Hollow for the summer, Harry,” she said softly. “That’s what we agreed on. That’s what Albus told me you’d agreed on when he summoned me. Why are you making plans now to do something other than what we asked of you?” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Will you ever stop thinking that you know best, or that you can just change your word when you give it without any consequences?”

Harry started to respond, but a shadow stirred behind his mother, and Dumbledore entered. He took a moment fussing with his robes, as if he were going to appear in public at any moment and needed to look good, though as far as Harry could see, they were

his normal star-decorated attire.

Then he lifted his head. Harry looked straight into blue eyes.

Dumbledore knew, now, that Harry had been fooling him, only pretending to be under the compulsion.

Draco made a wordless noise, a small snarl, and drew his wand from his pocket, but Dumbledore got there first. He lifted a hand, and Draco's wand soared across the hospital wing to land in his palm. He lowered it gently to rest on a hospital bed next to him. He hadn't really looked at Draco all this while, Harry saw. The greatest part of his attention was on Harry himself.

And there was a storm gathering in his eyes.

"I thought we had agreed, Harry," he said, his voice full of ancient disappointments. "I thought we could trust you, that you were not going to become a Dark Lord like the one you had struggled so hard to avoid becoming. But it seems that I was wrong."

He struck in the next moment.

Harry had already called a *Protego*, one of the Charms he could do without thought, wandless, in his sleep if he needed to. The shield sprang up around him and Draco, and the mingled light of Dumbledore's spells—two cast at once, hexes to render him sleepless and motionless—bounced off the shield. Dumbledore only lightly sighed, as if he had anticipated this result and did not like it, but could put up with it for the necessary length of time. He moved a few steps forward, putting out a hand to Lily when she would have followed him.

"Rest, my dear," he said gently. "I know this would be hard for you to endure. You have struggled and sacrificed to keep your son from becoming what he has, and he has anyway. That is a hard blow for any mother to endure. Rest."

Lily stood where she was and bowed her head tamely. Harry felt his lip curling, wondering why someone who had been in Gryffindor would be so spiritless, and then he shook his head sharply. No, he wouldn't think that way. He couldn't think that way if he intended to heal her. She was only contemptible as she was right now. That didn't mean that she'd been contemptible when she was a child. It didn't mean that she'd never had any Gryffindor qualities.

Dumbledore moved forward until he stood at the end of the bed, just outside the limit of the *Protego*. His expression was the most benevolent and open that Harry could remember seeing it, perhaps because it was the weariest, as if he were letting Harry see all the toll the war had taken on him.

"Come, Harry," he said. "I know that you are dedicated to this war, committed to it, no matter that you do not agree with us on the best methods for fighting it. It would cost much and avail you little to destroy me, or hurt me, and it would earn you distrust from many of the Light wizards. And it would harm the wards of Hogwarts, and I think we all agree they must be made more secure than ever, now that Voldemort has returned. Surely, Harry, surely you can relax, and enter your mother's house, and have peace there as you learn about war."

Harry couldn't sense any edge of compulsion in the words, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. He bared his teeth, but said nothing. Dumbledore remained still, looking at him with patient, twinkling eyes, and waited.

Harry wondered for a moment why he didn't just attack. Then he remembered that Dumbledore probably feared his ability to eat magic, and, also, he wasn't supposed to be thinking about besting Dumbledore in battle. He was supposed to be his vates, to think about a way to snap his constricting thoughts—which Harry thought resembled a web, even though he knew they weren't a literal web—and invite him out into the light of wisdom and compassion.

Being a vates for everyone is hard.

"I don't want to fight you," he said carefully. "Nor do I want to destroy Hogwarts. But I found out that you used compulsion on me, *sir*, and for that reason, I don't want to go home for the summer. I don't want to follow any course of action that I agreed to when I wasn't myself."

"I was only looking out for your best interests, Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "If you would only—"

The doors of the hospital wing, which had only half-opened when Dumbledore and Lily entered, abruptly flew back with a *slam*. Harry caught his breath as he realized that wandless magic had done that—the wandless magic of a powerful, angry wizard or

witch who didn't feel familiar. It definitely hadn't been either him or Dumbledore, and it lacked the fanged edge of Snape's power, and Harry was sure that he would have known at once if Voldemort was on school grounds.

He understood in a moment when a familiar woman entered the room, though not the source of her rage. Auror Mallory, the Head of the Auror Office since Scrimgeour's election to Minister, was nearly as strong as Snape, and if her anger was riding her now, then so would her magic be. That power was strong and pure and cold to Harry, with a slight smell of tin, like snow being blown into his face.

Dumbledore turned and stared at Mallory with a faint frown on his face. "Auror," he said. "What is it?"

Mallory snarled at him. Her wand was in her hand, but she didn't point it at Dumbledore. Her magic was going to do just fine for her, Harry thought. He wondered if he should be more concerned about protecting her or Dumbledore. Even a Light Lord could be hurt by wandless magic of this power, if it got through his defenses.

"You *knew*," she said. "You *knew*, and you were *part* of it, and it sickens me to think that I trusted you."

Dumbledore frowned more deeply. "Auror, if you have had any strange dreams lately, I suggest that you consider what you are saying carefully. Voldemort could have reached out and—"

"Did you know," said Mallory, while her magic whirled a small object out of the pocket of her robes, "that the only reason my father was never tried was that I killed him when he started eyeing my younger sister?" The small thing spun twice around her head, then snapped towards Dumbledore. The Headmaster watched it come, probably, thought Harry, believing that it wasn't very dangerous.

Harry recognized it right before it hit. It was a Still-Beetle shell, which caused a stillness of the body so complete that even a powerful wizard wouldn't be able to free himself, his magic caged under his skin. This one must also have had a Portkey attached to it, or have been made into a Portkey itself, because ordinarily a Still-Beetle would root a prisoner's feet to the floor. Instead, Dumbledore froze and then disappeared into a whirl of colors a moment later.

"There," said Mallory, and her gaze went to Harry. She gave him a short, choppy nod. "Sorry to have to do it like this, Potter, but we didn't know where the bitch who calls herself your mother was. Your father came out of the house when we called for him. That was a neat, simple arrest. Not like this one." She snarled again, and then whirled.

Harry, dazed, saw that two other Aurors had come in through the doors while he was entirely occupied watching Mallory and Dumbledore. One was Tonks, her hair a gleaming, metallic black. The other was Auror Feverfew, whom he'd met a few times before, especially when he patrolled the school this year. They'd just finished binding Lily's hands behind her back. His mother's eyes were wide, and fearful, and glimmering with tears.

Finally, *finally*, too late to do any good by Dumbledore, Harry snapped out of his trance. He dropped the Shield Charm and pushed slightly away from Draco, who'd come close to him and wrapped an arm around his waist. "What are you *doing*?" he demanded. "Why are you arresting my mother and the Headmaster?"

Mallory, who had been watching Lily with her magic dancing and jumping around her, glanced at him. Her face softened. "I haven't gone through exactly the same things that you have," she said, and Harry faltered before the way she seemed to see him. "But I know some of what it's like. My father... touched me. Constantly. When I got too old for him and he started doing it to my sister, my magic killed him. I was never tried, of course. When the Wizengamot saw the Pensieves, they all agreed that I had a right to defend my sister."

Shit. Oh, shit. Oh, no. Harry coughed through the sticky mess in his throat, and managed to say, "What crime are my parents and the Headmaster charged with?"

"Child abuse," said Mallory. "Almost any kind that you can describe. Emotional, mental, neglect, willingly putting you in physical danger... leaving you to *You-Know-Who*, for Merlin's sake." Her mouth twisted, and she looked at Lily. "I don't consider you human," she said casually. "I thought you should know that right now."

Harry persisted through numb lips. "And who filed these charges?"

The answer was not unexpected, but the sound of it still bit into him.

“Severus Snape.”

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Chapter Two: Snape’s Firestorm

Snape could feel Harry coming.

Of course, even if he hadn’t, the ice that raced along his office walls and the green snake that appeared coiled around his throat, hissing, would have been clues, he thought. But he could feel the actual rolling power of Harry’s magic, too, a storm that promised pain and headache and heartache all in one. It grew to a dull pressure behind his temples long before the ice, long before the snake, long before the thundering knock that sounded on his door.

Of course, “long before” in this case means about five minutes, Snape thought. He sat back, one hand petting the snake looped on his neck. He hoped it would not coil too tightly. He still had bruises from the last time that Harry had decided to choke him.

“Enter,” he said, when the knock came. His voice was calm, resolute, if heavy. His mind was much the same way. There were advantages to being an Occlumens and being able to slip all his emotions into one of the quicksilver pools that the discipline enabled him to maintain.

Merlin knows I will need it now.

The door opened, and Harry strode into the room. Snape watched him. He might, if he did not know Harry so well, be properly frightened. Harry’s magic swirled around him in the form of an aura of darting black snakes, no sooner visible than they vanished again, crawling on the air and on his arms and clothing. His breath hissed and rasped between his teeth as though he had run a race, though it wasn’t that far from the hospital wing to the dungeons. He fixed his eyes on Snape so fiercely that their green color seemed actually to have deepened a few shades.

But Snape knew Harry, and he had eyes. He saw how much of Harry’s trembling and panting came from the effort of moving like this when he had done little but lie in a hospital bed and sleep for four days. He saw the pallor of his face, the dark circles beneath his eyes that even that much rest had done little to remove, the way his apparent left hand didn’t move quite in time with his right. He saw the fear behind the anger in Harry’s eyes.

If only that fear were for someone other than his abusers!

“Hello, Harry,” said Snape. “If you had wanted to see me, you know, you could have asked, and I would have come to you. I did not want to tax you by having you rise from your bed so early.” He knew exactly how he would respond to this. He would not panic, he would not lean back or flinch, and, above all, he would not apologize. Even if Harry wanted him to, it was rather difficult to retreat across his bridges when he’d burned them all.

This is the only way to do things, the only way forward. Snape studied Harry’s clamped lips, and decided the boy was trying not to say anything that would result in a scream. *Harry claimed to want to change matters. Perhaps I can even make him see that this is a part of that.*

Then he strangled the hope and pushed it back under the carcass of his heart. He had given up rights to Harry’s love when he did this. He had to remind himself of that. It would never do to forget reality. He might long to have that love, that forgiveness, back, but it would have to be entirely Harry’s choice to give them.

“How does it feel,” Harry whispered at last, “to know that you have contributed to three murders?”

Snape froze, his heart beating louder than the snake hissed. “The Aurors did not—“ he began.

“No, of course not.” Harry gave a small laugh that was on the verge of being crazed with exhaustion. *He is nearly at the end of his strength*, Snape thought, as he watched Harry whirl away from him. “But you slaughtered the people that Lily and Dumbledore and James could have become. They might have been entirely different if I’d just managed to talk to them.” Harry was breathing fast, his voice barely steady, as he extended a hand towards the wall and the ice cracked, tumbling in shards to his palm. “I was on the verge of changing my relationship with James. You *know* that. You *know* he was getting better. Why did you charge him, too?”

“It had nothing to do with my rivalry with him,” said Snape quietly. “I will say that under Veritaserum if you like, Harry.”

Harry remained motionless for a moment, before his shoulders stiffened. Then he said, “No. I don’t need that. Tell me why.”

“Because he was a danger to you, and always must have been.” Snape paused for a moment, wondering if he should try to spare the one who had helped him, and then pushing ahead as he remembered a resolve that had shone no less than his own. “Because your brother showed me the letter that James wrote him.”

Harry slumped as if someone had punched him in the solar plexus. “No,” he said a moment later, his voice hollow.

“But yes,” said Snape, and closed his eyes as the snake around his neck took up a discordant song of Harry’s pain. “The letter that said he believed you wished to reconcile with him and Lily, that you wished to be one family again, in Lux Aeterna or in Godric’s Hollow. He is *dangerous*, Harry. He did not bother writing you to see if you were serious, or question your decision, even though your brother said you had told him on Midsummer morning that you still did not wish to see your mother. He is not a good father. His concern for that—wife of his overpowered his concern for you.”

“But he could have changed,” Harry whispered. “He has changed. He *had* changed. He was caught up in the excitement of the moment. And Lily and Dumbledore—“

“One compelled you, the other believed, or wished to believe, that the compulsion was the result of your own decision.” Snape stood and leaned forward, eyes intently fastened on Harry’s back, ignoring the snake. He had too much trust in his ward to think that it would simply bite him without warning. “And that is not counting every atrocity they have heaped on you since childhood. They slaughtered thousands of the people you could have become. I will *not* allow you to damn yourself in trying to save them.”

Harry made a desperate noise in his throat that could have been the beginning of either a sob or a curse. He turned around, though, and Snape thought that a good sign. “Sir,” he said, making an obvious effort to speak quietly and calmly. “Surely, if I could forgive them, then you should be able to?”

Snape narrowed his eyes. Even with his emotions mostly locked in Occlumency pools, Harry retained an ability that no one else had, to bring his anger and his protectiveness surging to the front of his mind both at once. “And what about Peter Pettigrew, Harry? And what about your brother? They have arranged his life, though they did not try to arrange his mind as thoroughly as they did yours. And what about the way Dumbledore required us to part for a time in third year, and the way he has torn the wards, and his negligence in watching and defending his school from Death Eaters? What does it say that his first action after the Dark Lord’s return was to compel you, and not to take the field against him?”

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. Peter deserves justice, but couldn’t you have helped him file the charges and just left my own past out of it?”

“They would want to know why he obeyed Dumbledore’s orders,” said Snape. “And leaving you exposed to the Dark Lord would still have been seen as a crime, and then they would have looked further into the past, and they would have found the truth.” He bit back the insults he wanted to give, the urge to shake Harry until he woke up from whatever desperate dreams still consumed him. That had only a little to do with the snake around his neck, which had grown quieter as Harry’s anger retreated into pleading. “This was always going to erupt, Harry. I have received letters from Hawthorn Parkinson and Narcissa Malfoy and Adalrico Bulstrode, all attempting to pry, more or less subtly, information from me concerning your past. I waited to act until the moment when Lily and Dumbledore presented an intolerable danger to you. Then I could wait no longer.”

Harry shivered and put his head down. “But if you dropped the charges—“

Snape’s hold on his temper slipped at last. “I will *not* do that,” he snarled, slapping his hand down in the middle of his desk. The snake around his throat hissed at him. Snape stifled the urge to unwrap it and throw it across the room. Harry was staring at him with wide eyes, seeming to hear what he said at last, and that was quite enough of a reaction. “I will never do that,” said Snape, a little more calmly. “But I will admit that what the Ministry chooses to release, and what will escape on its own, is harder to predict. Therefore, I have made copies of the memories of your past—“

“What memories of my past?”

Snape tensed. He had forgotten that he hadn’t told Harry this. “I invented a potion that took memories from Dumbledore’s head about your training,” he said coolly. “I have been watching them all, and transcribing them. The Ministry has received that potion

along with one copy of the recorded memories.” He took a deep breath, and flung himself down the tunnel that had opened up before him. “I have also sent Narcissa and Hawthorn Parkinson copies of the memories. I am not sure how far you actually trust the Bulstrodes. But I know that you trust Narcissa, and I know that Hawthorn forgave you for being involved in Dragonsbane’s death.”

Harry’s face was an odd color, like green-tinted wax. His voice was a whisper, so deep with betrayal that Snape had to turn away from him. “Why would you do that?”

“Because,” said Snape steadily, “I knew that you would turn away from me in the wake of this revelation—or even before, as you told me that you meant to do. You must have an adult near you who knows what happened to you and has the freedom to approach you.”

“What makes you think that I would let them near me?” Harry was glaring at him now. Snape knew the pressure of a gaze like that, even though he wasn’t looking at Harry. The snake around his throat took up the hissing again, too, sounding more serious than it had the last time.

“I know you,” said Snape. “They are your allies, and you are sensible of the promises that you have made them. Besides, you would not blame them for having knowledge that was given to them. You would blame me for betraying you, and that is what you are doing.” He gained, from what place he would never know, the courage to turn around and face Harry again. “I am going to make sure that you are protected, Harry, and in this matter I am aware that I am acting against your will.”

“But that’s,” said Harry, and stopped. Then he returned to the whisper, which Snape found harder to endure than the raging. *Probably the exact reason that he’s using it.* “Please. I came through it all right, didn’t I? They abused me, if you insist on using that word, and I still survived. And I’m taking steps to make sure that they don’t hurt anyone else. I was confining Dumbledore’s compulsion. I was getting ready to work on Lily. James would have been easy. Please, drop the charges.”

Snape shook his head. He wondered how he could phrase things so that Harry would know it was no good appealing in this direction. He had already been as blunt as he could, he thought.

No. Not quite as blunt as you could be.

“No, Harry,” he said. “Even if I dropped the charges now, the Minister would still investigate them. I swore once that I would unleash a firestorm to protect you, and reach for any help I could.” He folded his arms, but not because he was cold. “This dragon is flown, and everything is burning now. It is no good appealing to me to drop the charges. The moment is past when you could have changed things.”

Harry stood there shivering for a moment. Then he said, “My brother will have to endure this, too.”

“He agreed to,” said Snape quietly.

Silence. Then Harry whispered, “I don’t understand. Don’t you care about my parents and Headmaster Dumbledore at *all*?”

Snape curled his lip. “In comparison to you? Not at all,” he said.

Harry just stared at him for a long moment. Then he said, “But they’re human, too.”

“And so are you, Harry.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair. “It’s different with me, that’s all.”

“How different?” Snape decided that he might as well push on this point. The best he could hope for was Harry both safe and awakened to his potential danger, to what would have been the consequences if his parents and Dumbledore had remained free—and the consequences of their abuse in the past, as well. Harry was skating on the slippery ice of illogic right now. If Snape could shatter that ice...

“I just—it just is,” said Harry, in a low, fretful voice.

“How?”

“It just *is!*” Harry jerked his head up and glared at him. The snake around his throat tightened like a noose. Snape stood still, barely breathing, hardly daring to do anything but watch the face of his charge.

Harry swallowed several times, the rage draining away as something else obviously occurred to him. “I’m going to talk to the Minister,” he said abruptly, and then ran out of the room.

Snape watched him go, shaking his head as the green snake vanished. *If you believe Scrimgeour to be more sympathetic to your parents than I am, Harry, you are grossly mistaken.*

“Harry. You could rest, you know.” Mallory’s hand on his shoulder was firm, her voice soft and warm. “You don’t have to see the Minister right now. I know that he wanted to talk to you sometime soon after your parents and the old fool were arrested, but it could have been any time in the next few days. You don’t need to do this now.”

“I want to,” said Harry, and gave a little shake that would get her hands off him. Regulus, in his head, sighed and whispered at him, but Harry wasn’t in the mood to listen. He was remembering, with all the clarity he could summon or force into his mind, all the times that Scrimgeour had acted fairly. He might achieve the right ends by sneaky methods sometimes, but they were the *right* ends. Harry trusted the Minister’s sense of justice. Surely Scrimgeour would see that that justice, the cause of greatest peace and regard for other people’s lives, required the release of his parents and Dumbledore. The trial would only cause a great deal of publicity and pity and excitement that would detract from their efforts to fight the war against Voldemort, and it would utterly ruin the chances anyone involved might have to be a new person. That *had* to matter.

Mallory crouched down in front of him, forcing him to look at her. Harry had insisted on accompanying the Aurors back to the Ministry, and had asked Draco if he would mind staying at Hogwarts. Mallory had acquiesced to all of it, though she had raised her eyebrows when Harry held Lily’s hand and murmured that it was going to be all right. She had escorted him to the Head Auror’s office without complaint. Harry could not imagine why she would balk now.

Mallory smoothed a hand down his hair. “Harry,” she said, “I do understand what happened to you. You should rest. This has been a great shock—I remember that it was a shock to me when the Aurors found out what I had done to my father—and you’re swaying on your feet.”

Damn. Harry steadied himself by putting his hand on the wall. “Please, Auror Mallory,” he said, concentrating to make sure his voice didn’t shake. “I am sorry for what happened to you, and I understand that you only want to help me. But I have to see the Minister.” The urgency inside him was making his muscles twitch and jump like a caged unicorn’s. “Please?”

The Auror studied him, then nodded reluctantly. She rose and rapped on the Minister’s door. Scrimgeour’s voice answered at once, with no trace of tiredness. “Come!”

Harry let a cautious beam of hope enter his heart as he stepped into the office. Fawkes’s message about the vision would have reached Scrimgeour by now. He had other things to think about. Surely, surely he would see that it was best—

And then he stepped in, and saw the way that the Minister’s yellow eyes fixed on him, and knew it was not going to be that easy. Fawkes, sitting on an arm of the Minister’s chair, lifted and flew towards him, singing. Harry held out his shoulder for the phoenix, but found himself unable to look away from Scrimgeour. There was admiration there, and respect, and profound compassion, and iron determination. Harry was afraid of what the determination meant.

“Fiona, please leave us,” said Scrimgeour.

Auror Mallory hesitated. “Sir—“

“You may go to the prisoners’ cells only if you think you’re able to control yourself, Fiona,” Scrimgeour said. “Not otherwise.”

Harry felt the movement of air across the back of his neck as Auror Mallory bowed. Then she retreated, and there came the sound of the door shutting.

He’s not going to help, Regulus whispered in his head. *Save your strength, Harry. Get some rest, and heal. This is what should have happened long since, and you know it. He’s not going to help.*

Harry shook him away, almost literally, and sat down in the chair in front of the Minister's desk. "Sir," he said, deciding that he might as well be direct, "you've heard of the charges against my parents and Dumbledore by now. I would like to ask that they not come to trial."

"Impossible," said Scrimgeour, without changing expression.

Harry drew in a harsh breath. So Regulus had been right, but it was still like crashing full-force into a wall that he hadn't known was there.

He blamed his shock for letting Scrimgeour get a question in edgewise. "What happened, Potter? You've got blood all down your face."

Harry swallowed. He'd honestly forgotten that, but now that Scrimgeour had drawn his attention to it, the dried blood felt flaky and itchy. "It's my scar, sir," he said quietly, and lifted his fringe, though he didn't know if Scrimgeour would be able to make out the scar under the liquid. "It's a connection, of sorts, to the Dark Lord. And I know that he's returned to full power now."

Scrimgeour dipped his head. "This trial will undoubtedly be hard on you," he observed in a distant voice. "It will be hard on everyone."

"Yes!" Harry gratefully seized the chance at explanation. "That's the reason I would like you to stop it, sir. All it will do is bring up bad feelings and cloud the air with old crimes. Do we need that, on the eve of battle? I don't think so. What my parents did is old news now, and I was rebuilding a relationship with my father until my guardian intervened." He paused, remembering something else he had meant to do. "That reminds me. I wanted to ask for papers to terminate Severus Snape's guardianship over me."

He waited. Scrimgeour eyed him for a moment. Then he said, "It might take me some time to find the paperwork."

Harry blinked. He knew the Minister's tactics. He had just never dreamed that he might use them on *him*.

"Why?" he whispered, too stunned to add any title of respect.

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "I was an Auror, Mr. Potter," he said, and his voice dipped into the Muggleborn diction he used in moments of great emotion. "I know 'em when I see 'em—criminals like your parents and the Headmaster, trials that have to be endured. Snape saw 'em before I did. And he did the best thing a guardian should for his charge. You won't do half so well with anyone else." He paused. "Do you have someone else in mind?"

"No," said Harry.

Scrimgeour nodded. "And unless Snape actually wants to emancipate you—which is about as likely to happen as my hair turning purple with green polka dots—then you need a guardian with your parents in prison."

"But if you released them—"

Scrimgeour lunged over the desk, the motion so unexpected that it silenced Harry. "They are child abusers," Scrimgeour snarled at him. His eyes made him look like an old lion watching its prey, though Harry knew the Minister wouldn't consider Harry his prey. *No, that's reserved for people less able to defend themselves*, Harry thought, and felt another surge of angry worry for his parents and Dumbledore. "I've dealt with abuse cases before, Potter. I have no sense of humor about 'em at all. None. Do you understand me? It's an Auror's job to arrest abusers and save the victims."

"I," said Harry, "am *not* a victim."

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed further. Moving slowly, carefully, as though his bad leg had started to pain him, he sat down again. His voice was clipped when he spoke. "And I've seen that before, too, Potter. Children denying that what happened was abuse, saying that they deserved it."

"What does deserving have to do with anything?" Harry shook his head. There was a buzzing in his head, a howling like a storm in his ears. "I never said that I deserved it. I said I wasn't a victim. I'm not helpless. I could have defended myself if they ever physically hurt me. I was trying to *help* them, don't you understand?" His voice had turned into a plea, which horrified him, but he thought it might be one way to get Scrimgeour to comprehend him, since rational argument hadn't worked. "I've managed to

persuade you that you should work with magical creatures instead of against them. I've managed to persuade some of my allies that their best chance lies with me and not Voldemort, even some of the ones who served Voldemort. I could have managed to persuade my parents and Dumbledore that their course was wrong, and then we could have handled everything privately."

"That doesn't change the fact that it was abuse, Potter," said Scrimgeour. "It doesn't change the fact that this is just another species of saying you deserved it, exonerating those who committed the crime and condemning yourself."

"I've forgiven them," said Harry. He was beginning to feel frantic, but he repressed it. There *had* to be some way of turning this aside. Snape had said the dragon was flown, but the dragon was still in the Ministry. There had to be some way of capturing and taming it. "I've not condemned myself for anything but weakness and indecision. Please. Let them go."

Scrimgeour shook his head slowly, but not as if he were refusing, more as if he were expressing silent wonder. "I see that Snape was more right than I ever dreamed," he said. "He said that you'll proceed in your convictions even with proof to the contrary staring you right in the face." His expression softened further. "Potter, I admire you enormously for surviving under these conditions. You have immense strength. But it's time for you to face your past, and that will take even greater strength. Can you do it?" He leaned forward, his eyes intent.

"What matters is whether *they* have the strength." Harry shifted hard enough to unseat Fawkes, who settled on the back of his chair instead and wrapped a warm wing around his neck. Harry sat on the impulse to break down. *Control, control, I have to have control.* "Don't you see, Minister? I'm concerned about them, and not about me."

"I see that," said Scrimgeour. "Better than you can imagine. Harry."

Harry swallowed, in order, the urges to lash out and scream out and cry. *If he sees, why is he ignoring the truth? It'll be hard, but I can survive anything they throw at me. I can survive being seen, until people get bored and go back to paying attention to something else. But Connor and Lily and James and Dumbledore...why is no one more concerned about them? Connor may think he can survive this, but he doesn't know that like I know I can. And the others! Am I really the only one who cares about them?*

He was becoming horribly, horribly afraid that he was the only one who did.

"I'd like to see my parents," he said. "Please." He knew it was no good asking to talk to Dumbledore. The Still-Beetle would make him unable to talk, and the Ministry was not about to remove that confinement yet.

Scrimgeour stared at him.

"I promise I won't hurt them," said Harry, in an agony of impatience. "I'll swear whatever oath you like."

"I am not worried about *you* hurting *them*," said Scrimgeour, in a voice full of meaning.

I'm worried about them hurting you. Harry could translate that well enough. It made him want to rage and shout and spit. Merlin, why did no one see that his parents were the victims here? They were the ones unable to defend themselves against accusations that would destroy their lives. Snape's firestorm would burn them alive. Dumbledore at least had his magic and the protection of his past reputation. But James's Auror exploits were old enough not to matter. And Lily...

His mother was without her magic.

And if they find out why she lost it, they'll only use it as more evidence of this being abuse that I couldn't survive. Goddamnit!

He shook his head, and made an effort to calm down and just *think*. "My father, at least, sir," he said. "The charges against him are different, aren't they? Just neglect, instead of active abuse?"

Scrimgeour paused as though reluctant to acknowledge it, and then said, "Yes, they are. But he was still a party to this."

Harry let out a low whistling breath. "He was on the verge of connecting with me again. He'll think a large part of this is just Snape's grudge against him coming to the forefront. Please, sir. I want to talk to him. I want to explain. Let me?"

Scrimgeour stood. "I see that you will not rest until this request has been granted," he said. "And better the man who sired you than the woman who bore you. I will conduct you to this interview."

Harry nodded. He would have liked to go alone, but he knew, from the expression on Scrimgeour's face, better than to ask.

This is a mistake, Regulus insisted at him.

Harry didn't bother answering. Regulus and he had distinctly different ideas of what was right in this particular case. Regulus had actually whispered, when Harry had been talking with Snape, that Snape had done the right thing.

The cell they kept James in was a plain room, but not entirely bare. It had a bed in one corner, a writing table, a battered bookshelf, and a door that Harry thought led to the loo. Of course, it lacked any form of entertainment and Harry knew his active, studious father would be going crazy here, but compared to some of the cells they might have had at Azkaban, this was the height of luxury.

They entered to find James on his feet; he seemed to have sprung up the moment he heard the locking wards fall and the key turn, and was staring tensely at the door. His face was white.

"Hello, Dad," said Harry, his voice half-strangled with emotion, and started to step forward. Scrimgeour's hand came down on his shoulder, holding him in place, and Fawkes fluttered in front of him, momentarily obscuring the sight of James.

But Harry could hear his words well enough.

"How can you call me that, after what you did?" he snapped. "You said that you were going to come home, that you loved your mother enough to give her a second chance, and then *this*. How could you do this to people you claim to love?"

Scrimgeour's voice held every nuance of polite loathing as he replied, "I am surprised that you can ask that, sir. Do you know what love *is*? It looks rather different from your own behavior."

Fawkes dipped back to sit on Harry's shoulder, and showed James advancing a step. Scrimgeour's wand was up and pointing at once, and Fawkes gave a chirp that filled Harry's mind with visions of burning.

"I was under a compulsion from Dumbledore when I wrote that letter, Dad," said Harry, trying to remain as calm as he could. He deserved these castigations from James, Merlin knew he did, but they were pushing him further and further towards the edge of a breakdown that he couldn't afford to have. "I did mean to come home at the time, but only until I broke free of the compulsion. And then I didn't know how to tell you the truth without also revealing it to Dumbledore."

James shook his head, wildly. "Why were we arrested, though? That's what I don't understand."

Scrimgeour growled like a thunderstorm. "Because what you have done is wrong," he said. "Love is unfamiliar to you. What about the concept of justice?"

Harry flinched. *Letting him escort me was a mistake*. "I didn't choose that," he said, willing his father to believe him. "I would never have chosen to do that. That was entirely Snape's decision."

"And you didn't stop him?"

"I didn't know anything about it until just an hour ago!" Harry controlled himself at the expression on James's face. *Calm, calm. This isn't his fault, remember? And he's upset*. "I promise, Dad, I'm going to try and free you. Make them see that what you did wasn't that bad, that—"

"That's not enough, Harry." James turned away, burying his face in his hands. "Even if we were released right now, the taint would cling to us and follow us around. No one's going to hire me now. Everyone's going to think your mother some kind of madwoman, and Dumbledore." He gave a harsh laugh. "The war's coming, Harry. Albus wrote me about that. How do you think we can fight it now, with the leader of the Light side in prison for child abuse? This is horrible. It's all horrible. Our lives are utterly destroyed."

Harry bowed his head. *I knew this would happen. Damn it, why did I let them tell Snape about the compulsion? I'm sure that that was what pushed him into acting now*.

“And our family life, you boys’ childhood, will be all over the papers,” James was saying, each separate phrase hooked out from the back of his throat. “Did you think about how this would affect your brother, Harry? Why did you tell anyone about what happened at Godric’s Hollow? We’re all smeared with shit now, and it’s all your fault—“

“*Silencio.*”

James’s voice cut off. Scrimgeour lowered his wand and turned Harry around. Harry let himself be turned. He barely felt it. He was tingling and going numb with shock.

“What he said was untrue,” said Scrimgeour calmly. “Utterly. Come with me, Harry.” He lifted his head, and Harry didn’t see what expression was on his face as he addressed James, since he couldn’t seem to stop himself from staring straight ahead. “You are charged with neglect, Mr. Potter,” said Scrimgeour. “*Charged.* I am going to look over the evidence that Professor Snape laid before me more closely. I find myself, after hearing this little speech, unable to believe that neglect is all it is.”

He turned and guided Harry out of the room, his hand never faltering. Harry shivered, and followed.

The truth had hit him along with James’s words, or perhaps because of them, like a block of stone falling on his head.

There is no way back. Their names really are smeared now. The dragon is flown. The firestorm is burning.

All I can do is help them ride out the storm as best I can.

And I need a safe place to think about these things and plan out my strategy. Hogwarts won’t do right now.

Harry broke into a fit of shivering. Scrimgeour said nothing, but handed him over to an Auror Harry didn’t know, with soft instructions to wrap him in a warm blanket, give him chocolate to eat, and return him to Hogwarts.

Harry didn’t really remember how he got back to the hospital wing; his shock was too great. He did know that Draco was waiting for him, and a second figure who, on examination, turned out to be Narcissa.

Harry nodded at her, and faced Draco, who checked himself sharply at the sight of his expression.

“I’ve decided to come to Malfoy Manor for the summer,” said Harry. “If I’m still welcome?”

Draco at once hurried forward and clasped him close in his arms, whispering to him. Harry looked at Narcissa, who nodded.

Harry closed his eyes and held on fiercely to Draco. He didn’t think he could bear to see the pity he knew must be in Narcissa’s eyes. She knew, but he doubted she would press him about things the way Snape would have, and the Manor was quiet and isolated enough for him to think.

And Draco would be there.

I can’t keep this firestorm from burning, but perhaps I can tame some of its winds.

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

Chapter Three: He Stands Not Alone

Narcissa rubbed her fingers gently over the back of the small wooden dog she held, and watched her son embrace Harry. Harry embraced him back, and Narcissa supposed that was a good sign.

His cheeks still bore the red-brown traces of dried blood, and his eyes were glazed and stunned and staring. But even those could be cleansed; even those could be healed. Narcissa’s concern was whether he would recover in enough time to meet the Dark wizards who had agreed to ally with him, or at least the first seven, who had all grown subtly more pressing in the last few weeks.

I do not know if he will. Narcissa gave a little shiver of mingled excitement and disquiet as she thought about what Harry had done in the past, and then about the memories that Severus had sent her. *But living in uncertainty like this is more exciting than I*

would ever have given it credit for.

Harry at last gently pushed Draco away from him, and faced her. “Did you come to take us to the Manor, Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked.

Narcissa watched him for a moment. His eyes didn’t lose their glazed look, but neither did they waver. So. He was not yet letting himself collapse and relax, but neither was he curled up and shaking against his will. She would follow his cues, then, and not say everything that she wanted to say until they were back at the Manor.

“I did,” she said. “But I also found this. I thought you might be interested in it.” She extended the toy with a solemn look.

Harry took it with a confused expression at first, but then, awkwardly manipulating it with the fingers of his single hand, managed to turn it over. When he read the letters carved on the belly, he took a quick breath and looked up at Narcissa.

“This *is* him,” he whispered. “It has to be. Thank you.”

Narcissa nodded, smiling. She had thought to look at the toys she fetched from Wayhouse herself, to see if the Dark Lord might have left any distinguishing marks on them, and encountered the dog with R.A. B. carved on its belly. Perhaps the Dark Lord had done that for his own amusement, perhaps simply to be able to find the toy again, but it was too great a coincidence for one of the toys to have Regulus’s initials. At least they could begin the work on re-Transfiguring there.

“I’m not *that* good at Transfiguration,” Harry was saying regretfully, rolling the dog in his fingers now. “I’ll have to take this to Professor McGonagall—” He paused as though remembering something. “No,” he said softly. “She’s Headmistress McGonagall now, isn’t she?”

“She would be, yes,” said Narcissa carefully. The more she saw of Harry, the more concerned she became. She was not sure how much taking him to the Manor would help. He looked like a fragile collection of glass shards held together around an iron rod. She was not sure if he would *let* himself collapse. But if he fell apart against his will, or if he met Henrietta Bulstrode so obviously weakened...

“Then let’s go see her, and congratulate her on her new position,” said Harry, with such a straight face that Narcissa didn’t recognize the morbid joke until her son smothered a stunned laugh. Her worry grew as she followed Harry out of the hospital wing and towards the Headmaster’s office.

He needs rest. How to convince him to take it?

Yet he didn’t look as if he needed rest with his face turned away from her, Narcissa noticed. His stride was firm and strong, and he walked with his head held high. He glanced at the walls they passed now and then, as if he were estimating the strength of the wards and protection spells that crawled over them. Narcissa wondered if he was only acting.

Or perhaps they trained him to change his own weariness into strength, to keep going even when he was on the brink of collapse.

The anger that had been burning in her since she read the scrolls Severus sent tried to roar up again. Narcissa took a deep breath and carefully placed a lid over the embers. The anger could do her no good right now; she stood a chance of breaking in a different way, but no less disastrously, than Harry if she tormented herself with those thoughts. They would wait.

They reached the gargoyle, and Harry murmured the names of several sweets before it leaped aside. Narcissa wondered if McGonagall hadn’t had the time to change the password yet, or if the old Head of Gryffindor House also preferred the same ridiculous ones as the former Headmaster.

The former, child-abusing, deceptive Headmaster...

Narcissa banked the fire again. In the end, it would burn longer and hotter, and be put to better use, for having been balked for a time. She rode the moving staircase up behind Harry and Draco, and watched the way her son leaned towards Harry, and wondered. Lucius was assuredly right in what he planned to do about Harry’s abuse. She did not think he was right in the observations he had made to her on Draco the other day.

They knocked on the door of the office, and a tired voice answered, “Yes, I’m here. That’s you, isn’t it, Harry?”

Narcissa flicked a suspicious glance at the ceiling, and only then saw the glow of the green watching spell in the corner above her. She shook her head. She really should have seen it at once. She drew her wand and held it loosely at her side as Harry opened the door. Her last meeting with the old cat had not been pleasant.

The office looked strangely altered, though Narcissa had only been in it a handful of times as a student, and only once as a parent. And anyway, it had only been a few hours since Dumbledore was arrested, as Draco had told her when he firecalled; why would McGonagall make her first priority changing the decorations?

Who knows why Gryffindors do anything? Including abuse their children—

This time, Narcissa told herself, firmly, that she simply wouldn't think about it until they returned home. This anger felt creeping, insidious, worse than anything she'd experienced before. In fact, it felt more like the madness that sometimes ran in the Black family and which her mother had warned her about than any normal anger. She had to ignore it, and therefore, she would.

McGonagall stood up from behind the desk when she saw them, though Narcissa thought that was less a gesture of courtesy and more so that she could have her wand out and freedom of movement if she needed it. Her eyes fixed on Harry's face first of all, and she made a faint noise of distress.

"Mr. Potter," she said softly. "Your face is covered in blood."

"My scar bleeds when I dream about Voldemort, Headmistress," said Harry, ignoring the way McGonagall started at the title. "I came to ask you for a favor." He held up the wooden dog. "This is Regulus Black, Sirius' brother. He betrayed Voldemort, but he got caught and Transfigured, and no one knew what he got made into until just a few days ago. Can you work on changing him back?"

McGonagall was blinking and staring throughout this, but to her credit, Narcissa thought, she took the dog from Harry and gently smoothed her fingers over the wood. Then she closed her eyes, and her face altered, becoming the sharp, focused expression that Narcissa remembering seeing in countless Transfiguration classes as she examined botched student work. Narcissa had never been that good at Transfiguration.

She shook her head, telling herself that she was no longer eleven, and she should no longer let that look intimidate her.

"Yes, this is a Transfigured human," McGonagall was murmuring. "But the spell is hooked to several powerful Dark Arts curses that would affect anyone who tried to undo the change, and there are preservation spells, too, I assume to keep him alive while they tortured him. If I don't pay attention to keeping them intact, he'll come back wounded and bleed to death." She set the dog gently on the desk before she opened her eyes. "I can change him back, Mr. Potter, but it is not the work of a few days, or even a few weeks. It will take months."

Harry paused, and then said, "That's all right, Headmistress. I can live with that. I'll bear it."

McGonagall took a deep breath, and Narcissa recognized what she was going to do, but not in time to prevent it as she leaned forward and said, "Just as you have borne everything else that happened to you so far, Harry?"

Harry stiffened. Then he said, "Not in the same way, Headmistress. We found Regulus after a long quest and looking in several other places. I got resigned to it taking some time."

"That is not what I meant, Harry," said McGonagall. Narcissa would not have thought a Gryffindor could be so merciless. "I have read the memories Severus wrote out. You have been ignoring much of what happened to you. If you had told me in your second or third year what the Headmaster had done, I would have helped protect you. I swear it. He lost my respect almost two years ago now. I would have helped."

"That's not the point," said Harry. His voice had gone high and strained. "Please, Headmistress. I appreciate your concern—" Narcissa snorted; no, he didn't. McGonagall's gaze flicked to her, but went back to Harry as he continued. "—but there's really nothing anyone could have done before this point. And I know that you're busy with the school. That's another reason I'm not going to be impatient with your changing Regulus back. Merlin knows you have a lot to do." Narcissa leaned forward in time to catch the edge of a bright, brittle smile on his face. He was fighting back the emotions that wanted to rampage across his body.

"Harry," said McGonagall softly.

“I don’t wish to speak of it,” said Harry. “Isn’t it enough that I’ll have to do so in public in a few months, whether I want to or not?”

McGonagall looked stricken, but Narcissa felt a tiny flicker of relief, both at the words and the way that Harry edged closer to Draco, reaching out one arm for support. *At least he can admit that the trial is going to happen. I would be worried if he thought he could somehow turn the juggernaut Severus has released aside.*

“You are right, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall stiffly. “Where are you going for the summer, if I may ask?”

“With the Malfoys,” said Harry. “I know that Connor is going with the Weasleys. I’ll visit him soon. I have—lots of things to say to him.” He stared at her for a moment, then said, “And I feel like I should have more to say to you, too, Headmistress, but I don’t. Not right now.”

McGonagall simply nodded. Then her eyes looked up and caught Narcissa’s over the boys’ heads. Narcissa sneered at her. It was infuriating that this witch—no longer young, no longer pretty, and not even of the Dark—could make her feel as if she had four legs and a hairless tail with just one look.

“If you hurt him,” said McGonagall softly, “I will Transfigure you into a mouse and set you loose in the castle.”

She didn’t need to say that she would find Narcissa in that form, or that Mrs. Norris would. Narcissa simply nodded, and then waited for the boys to pass her before she left the office. She wanted to remain between them and the Headmistress, just in case.

She studied Harry’s back worriedly the whole time. Already, he had let the strain fall from his shoulders and moved a bit away from Draco. He was chattering animatedly with her son, but, like his smile in the office, that mask shone too brightly and was liable to shatter.

What should I do?

Put off the others until Harry is ready to face them, of course. Until he’s had at least a few days to recover.

Narcissa felt much better once she had made that decision, and a little ashamed that it had taken her so long to make it. Of course her family came first, and Harry was important to her family, and important to her in and of himself, and half-adopted already, with the linking to the wards that Lucius had given him at Christmas. The other wizards and witches were pressing, Henrietta Bulstrode in particular, but she could dance around them and make excuses for at least a few days longer. And she would do so, until Harry was soothed, or had shattered and then drawn himself back together again.

What most worried Narcissa at the moment were two things: that she did not know how long it would take Harry to work through his emotions, and that she did not know how to get through the wards into the Ministry to punish Harry’s parents and Dumbledore as they deserved.

In some ways, I wish Severus had not gone to the Ministry. It would have made it easier to kill them.

On the other hand, perhaps that was the exact reason Severus had done it.

Narcissa fixed her eyes on the two boys walking ahead of her. *I promise, Severus, I will guard Harry as if he were my own. In many ways, he already is.*

“Draco. I would like to see you alone.”

Draco stood up at once from the chair in the library where he’d been reading the book about basilisks, and put the tome down on the table beside it. He followed his father out of the library without a backward glance, because Harry wasn’t in the room with him. Harry was asleep in his bedroom upstairs, exhausted from another day of researching every subject that occurred to him—means to get the last few remaining Dark spells off the stump of his wrist, ways to counteract basilisk poison, powerful glamour incantations.

The interrogation techniques that Aurors used with abused children.

Draco had bitten his lip when Harry found those books, but he'd said nothing. He'd had a lot of practice at silence in the last few days, since Harry returned from the graveyard. He helped Harry when Harry let him, and when Harry asked to be alone, he left him alone, and when Harry reached out for him—more and more frequently now—Draco was there. It was three days now since they had come home to the Manor, and Draco had done all those things multiple times.

It was for Harry, of course it was, Draco thought, as he followed his father into the study where Lucius and Harry had spoken the first Christmas they met, but it was also for himself. He'd had the sensation, over the last week, of watching pieces of his mind and soul shift and float and lock into new places. It was—rather strange, like watching an outside force change him, but Draco knew this wasn't Harry's magic, or even the news of Voldemort's return. It was the events around him interacting with what made him who he was, and the most magical thing about it was his awareness of the process and his determination to hold back and watch it rather than interfere and consciously change his mind.

“Sit down, Draco.”

Draco took the high chair that Lucius waved him to, noting with a distant pleasure that his feet reached the floor now, where they would have dangled a few inches off it last summer. His father paused with the most mild and fleeting of disconcerted expressions on his face, as though he had found himself caught by surprise at the same sight, and then went smooth-faced again and sat down in his own chair.

Draco calmly fixed his eyes on his father. Lucius was tall and imposing. He was the man Draco had loved and adored and been in awe of and feared since the days when he first became aware that he should keep silent around some people and talk to others. He had always been closer to his mother. She was more prone to let him know when he crossed an unbreakable boundary, but always treat him as if he behaved well otherwise. Lucius, meanwhile, often looked as if he were waiting for Draco to break one of those unwritten laws of good manners and pureblood behavior.

The thing was, Draco was fifteen now, and he no longer feared his father.

“You made a request of me some little time ago,” Lucius began. He always did this, too, approaching most subjects so obliquely that an outsider to the family might have blinked in confusion as he listened. But Draco was not an outsider to the family. “I find myself moved to grant it, as long as you tender me an apology for the argument that we had at the same time.” He sat back and put his fingers gently together, watching his son.

Ah. I'd thought so.

Draco tilted his head. “I find myself not much inclined for either the giving or the receiving of gifts at the moment, Father.”

Lucius's nostrils flared, the only sign that Draco had just taken him by surprise. He remained silent for a short time. Draco knew this tactic. It was meant to fluster and disconcert him. But he didn't have to be flustered and disconcerted if he didn't want to be.

He'd always been stubborn when he thought he was in the right, but then, that had been a kind of frantic stubbornness, similar to Harry's at the moment. The shifting of his soul in the last week had taught him patient stubbornness, rather like a stone. Panic and fear did no good when you were sitting by the side of the man you loved and watching as he slept off massive trauma.

Lucius said at last, “I was under the impression that you rather wished to have the request you made of me granted.”

“I did,” said Draco, letting his father hear him emphasize the past tense ever so slightly.

They watched each other. Lucius could easily have broken the dance and asked him outright what had changed, and then Draco would have told him. But his father had started this waltz, and no matter what he might say about pride getting in the way of accomplishing one's goals, the fact remained that Lucius Malfoy was proud and stubborn and far too used to getting his own way to ask an honest question when he'd begun obliquely.

Draco could move the waltz ahead, though, and he did. “Was there anything else that you wanted of me, Father? If not, I should go back and research basilisks. Fascinating creatures, basilisks.”

His father's mind was obviously searching and sorting through his words, looking for some way in which they could be a threat. Then he gave a slight, sour smile, and tilted his head.

“Yes, Draco, by all means,” he said. “Did you know that in some of the legends, basilisks have green eyes, and in some, golden?”

“Then I’ve been in a room with both kinds at once,” said Draco, standing and striding out of the study. “How fascinating.”

His thoughts briefly swirled and stormed, representing the Chamber of Secrets to him, before he shoved them firmly back down. He had things to do.

He went to Harry’s bedroom and eased the door open. The sound of soft breathing from the bed didn’t stir. Draco liked that, liked that he was the only one who could approach Harry without waking him up. His mother had tried it a few times, but even she made Harry turn his head and at least regard her before he went back to his book or his nap.

Draco sat down in the chair next to Harry and shook his head. Harry still hadn’t allowed himself to heal. He was ignoring every mention of his parents and Dumbledore, slipping Narcissa’s every attempt to talk about the memories she’d received from Snape, and simply refusing to acknowledge why he was researching the common signs of abuse and how people found out about them.

But that was what Draco had expected. He knew Harry better than any of them did, after all. Harry faced many other things bravely, but from things like this, he went on running until he could run no more. Last time, he had run until Hawthorn Parkinson forced her way past his barriers and he collapsed in exhaustion. Everything else so far—Draco’s attempts to hold a conversation with him, the unicorns, the soothing atmosphere of the Manor—was only a temporary relief. He would have to fall further before he could land. Draco knew it.

Draco closed his eyes, and reached out gently towards Harry with his empathy. He wasn’t here to confirm things that he knew already, but to take note of a change that had happened in the past few days.

Yes. He was right. There was still the stinging sensation of pain from Harry, but it was muted, compared to what it should have been. Draco had likewise noticed that the emotions that represented winds from Harry had changed to breezes, and that he didn’t know the meaning behind some of Harry’s minor expressions or quick changes of mood at all anymore.

His empathy was changing, just like everything else about him.

Draco opened his eyes and regarded Harry thoughtfully. He had more sympathy for the person Harry had been during second and third year than he had ever had while the transition was actually happening. How *did* you go through a transformation like that and keep your sanity?

Of course, it helped that Draco wasn’t fighting his change and trying to stay the person he had been the way Harry had, and that he could step back from his emotions, thanks to his training in the dances, and regard himself as an interesting object. He did not think that would have been possible for Harry, who either tried to ignore himself entirely or followed well-worn paths of guilt and self-loathing.

Whatever his empathy was mutating into, Draco did not think it was altogether a different form of magic. He had noticed that, while he caught fewer emotions from his mother and father and Harry, he seemed to sense their *selves* better. He had known, the other day, just what book his father was looking for, and that his mother was sitting in her room and reading over the scrolls of memories from Snape again when he wondered where she was, and that Harry was going to take a step to the left before he actually did so. It was odd, and interesting, and Draco was looking forward to seeing where it went. At the moment, he thought it too caught in flux to give him any useful information.

He closed his eyes, and thought about the settled things, the things he *did* know.

The past week had brought home to him how firmly he was *not* Harry, for all that he loved Harry and would have given his own left hand to save his. He would not have dealt with these losses as Harry had done. He would have let Madam Pomfrey see the wounds the moment he got back to Hogwarts. He would have wept to express his grief, which Harry had very rarely done so far. He might have had trouble denouncing his parents as abusers, if that had happened to him, but he would be more accepting of the reality than Harry had shown himself even now.

He was *different*.

And—perhaps this was another part of the change that had started in his soul when he saw Harry coming up the path next to the lake with Fawkes on his shoulder—he found that he wanted to know himself, his own motives for doing things. Just loving Harry wasn’t a good enough reason any more. Yes, he loved Harry.

And?

Could he actually become a good fighter, an asset in a fight for his own abilities, rather than just someone Harry had to protect or someone who learned Dark Arts and dueling spells to protect Harry? Could he become interested in magical creatures for their own sake, and not just because Harry worked to free them? Could he find some way to share Harry's life that didn't involve subsuming himself in him?

He had wanted so badly to achieve equality with Harry, so that Harry would never overshadow him and they could stand on equal footing. But why should he worry about that, if he was simply going to drown *himself*?

He had one point at which he differed from Harry. He would find others—or he would find points of similarity and work from there. He wanted to have his own life, just as Harry did, even as they shared a life.

Draco didn't plan to tear himself from Harry, of course. Far from it. He would know himself, and he would know Harry, and he would be conscious what they shared and what they did not. He thought it would be the most interesting study of his life so far.

And when he was ready, he would break free of the cocoon of silence that had held him for the last week, and start pushing—both against people who might try to do things that shoved at him, like his father refusing to acknowledge Draco as a magical heir of the Malfoy family until Draco apologized for attending Walpurgis Night, and at Harry, from whom Draco had the right to demand some consideration, too.

He thought he would be ready soon.

He rather suspected that some people would be surprised when he opened his wings.

Wings. That's right.

Draco stood, brushed his hand over Harry's shoulder, and then turned and strode from the room. He had a letter to send, to confirm the order for Harry's birthday gift, that he had nearly forgotten about.

Lucius shook his head as he finished his letter. The owl he used for delivering ordinary messages, Octavius, waited patiently in the corner of his private study as he bound the note to his leg.

"To Ollivander," he said, and Octavius spread his wings and soared out the window.

Lucius watched him go, his hands folded behind his back. His right hand was clamped down on the left, that was true, pressing until Lucius could hear the bones grind together, but someone else coming into the room would only have seen him standing calmly. That was as it should be. Lucius put on a performance for an invisible audience most of the time, so that he could put on a flawless performance for a visible one when he needed to.

He had read one more scroll of the memories Snape had recorded. He read one a day, and had almost reached the end.

His right hand pressed down further, and Lucius knew there would be dents in the skin afterward. He would cast a glamour to cover them.

Some years ago, during the first war, the Dark Lord had sent Lucius and two other Death Eaters to capture Ollivander, wanting the wand-maker to himself. Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, those were the days of chaos when his attention was mostly occupied elsewhere, and Lucius had had a long-running grudge against the Death Eaters assigned to accompany him—one neither of them knew about. He had waited until they had entered the shop and he was sure that all their attention was on Ollivander, and then had dispatched them smoothly with a Killing Curse to the back of each.

Ollivander had thought Lucius had done it to save his life, and therefore he owed him a wizard's debt. Lucius had hardly wanted to discourage the impression, keeping it in reserve as a favor he might use someday, and had even helped the wand-maker make it look as if he had fled before Lucius and the others arrived. The Dark Lord had just fought a battle against Dumbledore, and had accepted the report. Compared to destroying Dumbledore, Ollivander was a low priority.

Lucius had never found a use for the wizard's debt.

Until now.

His right hand pressed down insistently, and Lucius felt his lips part in a slashing smile. Acceptable, now that he was alone, and he had wards on the study that would have chimed in a moment to let him know if his son or wife had entered the hallway outside the door.

He had wanted vengeance when Narcissa told him about the loss of Potter's hand, but he had wanted to think his target over carefully. Narcissa had claimed her sister, as she had the right to do, and planned to keep her alive, torturing her delicately, drawing out the kill to give her as much pain as possible, inflicting more and more debilitating wounds as time passed. Lucius approved. He would do the same thing, but he had to figure out which one of his former comrades would give him the most pleasure.

Then had come the memories, and the news, from Snape, that Potter's parents and Dumbledore would be arrested for child abuse.

And Lucius's rage had shaped itself into a knife pointing straight at his targets.

Lily and James Potter.

There were some things one did not do. Lucius supposed some of his enemies might have laughed at the thought of a Death Eater having morals, but he did, of course. He honored his family, and he knew that older blood was better, and he disdained murder and torture that did not serve a cause.

And he knew that child abuse was wrong.

One did not torture one's children. Love for the children argued against it. Magic argued against it. The most basic common sense argued against it. Perhaps a Muggle could get away with abusing a child—Lucius did not really care to know what Muggles did, and for all he knew, abused Muggle children were as common as doxies—but not a wizard.

The family would be shattered. The family was supposed to be inviolate.

The children might react by losing most of their magic, if they were harassed and suppressed so much that they became quiet and cringing. Many supposed Squibs in the pureblood lines centuries ago had come fully into their magic once their abusive parents died, their power roaring up in them when they had the time and space to breathe. The laws against child abuse had originally come about for that reason.

Or the child might lash out, turn, turn dangerous. Wizarding parents should never forget they were raising potential wizards and witches. Lucius had seen the remains of parents whose children did *not* turn meek and cringing. Narcissa herself had been called home to help her cousins Capella and Canopus, Sirius Black's parents, when their son turned on them at last. She had come back white-faced and silent, but, once she could speak, gleeful. Lucius had listened to the description of their wounds with the keenest sense of justice imaginable.

And now...this.

That someone would abuse a child with Lord-level power was beyond comprehension. What would happen if he turned on them? For that matter, what would happen to the rest of the wizarding world if once he lost his temper, or even came into his power unexpectedly, late in life, uncontrolled?

From the information that Lucius had silently collected on Tom Riddle's background in the last few months, he could guess at the answer—and Riddle had been more neglected and not thought of than abused. It was a wonder that Potter had not become a monster.

And the *waste*, the sheer and utter *waste*. When any Dark pureblood family would have welcomed a child like Potter with rejoicing, would have lorded it over their friends and relatives with constant smugness, and would have snapped up the chance to adopt him and make him their own son if he had been free before this, the Potters had turned their backs on him and tried to interfere with the natural expression of such rich, deep magic. It was enough to make Lucius sick with fury.

Lucius was not unconscious of the fact that his son loved Potter, and that the boy could easily become part of their family, and that he already half was, with his links to the Malfoy wards. But that only made what he had chosen to do all the sweeter, since he

could claim the privilege of revenge for himself. In any situation, at any moment, in any way, this would have been something Lucius would have risen against in his mind.

He would get one chance at Lily and James Potter, he thought, and no more, rather than the multiple ones that Narcissa planned to give herself with Bellatrix. The risk was too great to enter the Ministry many times. He would have to make it count. Rather than giving them one wound, and then returning to give them an even more devastating one, he would have to concentrate many rounds of torture into a few hours, and then finish things off with a curse that would kill them slowly, undetectably.

He knew how to do it. The books on medical magic waited patiently next to his chair.

He would need them, he found with mild surprise when he turned from looking out the window again. He had broken his left wrist with his pressing on it, and so great had been the haze of his anger that he had not noticed the pain.

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

Interlude: Special Order

*To: Tertius Serpentigena
Coluber House*

July 3rd, 1995

Dear Mr. Serpentigena:

This is simply a letter to confirm my order placed on the twenty-second of April. I had not heard anything from you since the original letter acknowledging that you had an Omen snake on hand, a laying female. Just to make matters clear, I wanted to request a young Omen snake, and neither an egg nor an adult female. All my research has made it clear how much depends on the young snake having his or her own mind before their choice of a partner is complete. An egg hatched by a certain person will result in an Omen snake too attached to that person, and most adults have chosen already, or never will. The need in this case is for a companion, a friend, not a mindless servant or a distant adviser.

Please acknowledge my letter, and inform me that you have such a snake on hand in Coluber House. If you do not, I must ask that you return the half of the payment I have given you directly.

Sincerely,
Draco Malfoy.

*To: Draco Malfoy
Malfoy Manor*

July 8th, 1995

Dear Mr. Malfoy:

I do indeed have several young Omen snakes on hand. My laying female's latest clutch has hatched, and I have been looking over the brood to see which would be most suitable. I have three females and one male, all a month old and very intelligent. Which one would interest you most?

Sincerely,
Tertius Serpentigena.

*To: Tertius Serpentina
Coluber House*

July 11th, 1995

Dear Mr. Serpentina:

For several reasons, a male snake is more desirable. Enclosed please find the second half of the payment, and I look forward to your delivery of the Omen snake no later than the morning of July 31st.

Sincerely,
Draco Malfoy.

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

Chapter Four: The Potter Alliance

Harry blinked, then blinked again. Somehow, of all the arguments he'd envisioned having with Narcissa Malfoy, this hadn't ever been one of them.

"But I could Floo over," he said, trying his most charming smile. Narcissa just gave him that long, slow look that told Harry she managed to see through most of his deceptions, and put down the scroll she'd held on the table. Harry's eyes darted to it, and then away again when he recognized Snape's handwriting. He did not ever want to know what Snape had written on those scrolls. Just looking at them, being reminded they existed, brought back the sting of betrayal more keenly than ever.

"The Weasleys have likely closed off access to their Floo Network except for utmost necessities," said Narcissa. "It is not inconceivable that your brother as well as you could be in danger from Voldemort, Harry, and they would know that."

"But the Burrow's protected by wards," Harry said. He knew that; Connor had reassured him of it when he said he was staying with the Weasleys for the summer. "We're not going to be in danger. I could send them an owl, and ask them to open their Floo at eleven or so, and I could go."

Narcissa shook her head, making her unbound hair ripple over her shoulders. "That's true. We could do that. Where is my mind today?" she murmured, massaging her forehead. Harry ventured no joke, because he was afraid of the answer. "However, I will still make sure the Aurors know where you are, Harry, and when you are likely to leave the Burrow, even if you will not permit them to actually escort you there. That way, you will have extra protection while you're outside the wards of Malfoy Manor."

Harry shook his head. "With all respect, Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Please, Harry. Call me Narcissa."

Harry nodded uncertainly. "All right, Narcissa," he said. "With all respect, I don't see why the Aurors would be interested. They've got other things to do."

A strange expression crossed Narcissa's face. Harry regarded it suspiciously. He'd managed to survive the few days he'd been at the Manor by using his familiarity with Lucius and Narcissa's expressions and movements to guide him in what he should say and do. Draco was the only person he didn't have to do that with, which made him more relaxing to be around. Now Harry wondered if he hadn't spent too much time relaxing. Not knowing what Narcissa would do next left him feeling as if his stomach was disintegrating.

"The Aurors are part of the case against your parents, Harry," said Narcissa quietly. "They are watching the Manor in rotating pairs, and they asked to be informed if you went anywhere else. They want to protect you against people who might throw themselves at you, either in accusation or in misguided sympathy. I think my niece and Auror Mallory are on duty now. They've both been here far more often than any of the others."

Harry felt himself fighting the urge to squirm. He fought it off successfully. "All right, then," he said. "I'll send the Weasleys an owl, and ask them to open their Floo at eleven. I'll come back at three. Is that acceptable, Mrs. Malfoy?"

“It’s acceptable,” Narcissa murmured, and this time the expression was familiar—a sad one—but Harry could see no reason for her to be wearing it. He shied away when she reached out towards him. Narcissa sighed and placed her hand gently back in her lap. “Very well, Harry. Let me fetch you parchment and ink.”

“I can get it myself. Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy.” Harry smiled gratefully at her and went back to his room. He had two letters to write, two for Hedwig to deliver, and he would rather not have anyone know that he was sending the second one.

Harry stepped uncertainly out of the Burrow’s fireplace. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but it wasn’t for his first sight of the house to be Molly Weasley’s shoulders as she grabbed him and hugged him firmly.

“Oh, Harry,” she said, as she held him. Harry just barely managed not to kick and struggle and get away. Lately, most embraces did that to him, causing a rushing feeling of disorientation and panic. “Oh, we were *so* sorry to hear what happened. I still can’t *believe* that Albus...that Lily...I knew her in the Order, and she was *so* different...oh, *Harry!*”

And so on, until finally, when Harry thought an acceptable amount of time had passed, he pushed back a bit, and Molly let him go, tears streaming down her face as she sniffled. She leaned past him to close down access to the Floo, giving Harry a moment to both steady himself and survey the kitchen of the Burrow.

The cheerful sounds of the Wizarding Wireless Network slid across the kitchen, though at the angle he stood, Harry couldn’t see where they were coming from. Most of the room was taken up by a scrubbed table, with chairs shoved close around it. None of the people sitting there were talking now, instead turned towards him, with their expressions caught somewhere between solemn and hesitant, as if they didn’t know what they should say to him, but knew it had to be something grand. Ginny was gnawing her lip, the twins were staring steadily at Harry, and an older Weasley brother, with slightly longer hair than normal and a fang dangling from one ear, was sipping at his tea in deliberate swallows.

Molly broke the awkward moment by turning around again and sweeping Harry further into the room. “Well, you know Ginny, of course, Harry, and Fred and George. And this is my oldest son, Bill.”

Harry nodded cautiously to him. Though he hadn’t seen an updated list of Order of the Phoenix members in several years, he thought he remembered Lily mentioning that Bill Weasley was one. He wondered if Bill would be angry with him for getting Dumbledore sacked and imprisoned.

“Hello, Harry,” said Bill. If he was angry, there was no way of telling it. He stood and extended a hand, which Harry took. He made no attempt to turn it into a hug, and for that, Harry was extremely grateful. “Heard about what happened to you. Awful,” he said simply. Harry relaxed a little further.

The twins whispered to each other, then one of them said, “We’ll go fetch ickle Ronnie and Connor. They didn’t think—“

“That you’d be on time,” finished the other, and they slipped out of the room.

Molly patted Harry’s head a few more times and shed a few more tears, then ordered Harry to sit down at the table so she could prepare some tea for him. Harry sat down and tried not to watch her. Narcissa never did her own cooking, of course, with house elves to do it for her. But Lily always had.

“Harry?”

He glanced up and met Ginny’s eyes. She had stopped gnawing her lip, and looked committed to whatever she was about to say. Harry braced himself. At least, once she had made an expression of sympathy or anger, it would be over, and then he wouldn’t have to listen to it anymore.

“I’m glad you came,” said Ginny quietly. “I think that Connor needed to see you, and you really look like you need to see him.”

Harry nodded.

“And I’m not going to say anything about your parents,” said Ginny. “They’re your parents, not mine.” She gave Harry a strained smile, then turned and followed the twins.

Molly had just plopped down a cup of tea in front of Harry, with an injunction to “Drink the whole thing, young man!” when Connor entered the room, with Ron a few paces behind him, at his right shoulder.

Harry hastily used his magic to levitate the teacup over and apparently hold it cradled in the glamour of his left hand. Connor was advancing with a fixed expression, and had seized his right hand tightly.

“Harry,” he said.

Harry found his throat closed. If he hadn’t wanted to talk to his brother so badly, he would have been prepared to dismiss this as a bad idea. As it was, he would just have to keep things going.

“Connor,” he said, after a cough, and glanced at Ron. Ron just gave him a look that had too much understanding in it. Harry lowered his head. “Is there some place where we can talk in private?” he asked.

“Harry!” scolded Molly. “You haven’t finished your tea yet.”

Harry hunched his shoulders. He didn’t like all this pressing *closeness*. He wanted to run from it, to go someplace where no one could see him and he could hide for a time. Draco had been letting him do that at Malfoy Manor lately. Harry did not know how he was going to get through four hours here.

Abruptly, Harry’s cup wavered and lurched and spilled on the table. Bill put down his wand, looking extremely surprised.

“Well, *that* was clumsy of me,” he said. “I was trying to bring the kettle to me, but I got Harry’s cup instead.” He winked at Harry as his mother went on a tirade that included the words “earring” and “no sense” and many another familiar topic about which she had apparently just been waiting to scold Bill. That gave Harry and Connor an opportunity to sneak out through the door. Ron remained behind, though Harry could feel his eyes every step of the way.

In the Weasleys’ garden, the shimmer of isolation wards was visible, more than familiar to Harry from the long childhood spent in Godric’s Hollow. Connor sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets, closing his eyes. As was usual with him over the holidays, he wore Muggle clothes, not robes.

“I love the Weasleys, but sometimes they get to be a little much,” he said. “And you looked like you were about to vomit or something.” He threw Harry a cautious look. “Are you going to start, or should I?”

Harry found that he had to start, because there was one question that he needed to ask above all others. “I can understand Mum, and even Dumbledore,” he said. “But why did you show that letter from Dad to Snape?”

He had expected astonishment, or hurt, or perhaps some self-righteous tirade about how much James deserved it. He had *not* expected Connor swinging around and gripping his arms, staring hard into his eyes, nor for his anger to be a diamond-edged rage.

“Because I’m *sick* and *tired* of the way he wavers,” Connor said, every word grinding out between his teeth. “He never makes up his mind permanently. Something always happens to change it. He was perfectly content to live with Lily until he found out about the abuse—“

“Connor, don’t call it that—“

“I have a perfect right to call it whatever I want.” Connor’s chin lifted. “I was living in that house, too, and it happened to me, too.”

Harry tugged fretfully against the hold his brother had on his arms. “But he was trying to reconcile with us.”

“I haven’t finished yet,” said Connor. “Then he couldn’t even make up his own mind, even when you used the justice ritual on Lily’s magic, and he *knew* you’d used it. He had to go through the Maze to make his decision. And then his resolve to be a good father lasted—what? A month, I think.”

“Longer than that—“

“You’re forgetting that he never wrote to you while you were with Snape last summer.” Connor lifted his head and tossed it like

an impatient horse, making his fringe fly off his scar. “Because he was childish, and wanted you to write him first. And he just had to write insulting letters to Snape, didn’t he? Now, I don’t think Snape’s an adult either, really, but James *should have known better*, if he really was the kind of man he said he was after the Maze. And he didn’t. And he kept on not knowing better. He tried to take you away from Snape without even asking if you wanted to be taken away, and then repaid your healing him with filing charges against Snape.”

“But that’s one of the things that makes this so bad,” said Harry, determined to get a word in edgewise. “That it was Snape who filed the charges, I mean. Dad thinks this is just some part of a great scheme against him, that Snape did it out of revenge.”

“Well, yes, he would think that,” said Connor dismissively. “Because he’s a self-centered prat who never grew up.”

Harry stared at his brother, well aware that his mouth was hanging slightly open. “But you love Dad,” he said. “And you’ve never liked Snape.”

Connor blinked a bit, then abruptly let him go and whirled away, kicking at the ground. He managed to get a gnome who was just peering out in the head, and it uttered a thin little scream and ducked away. Harry kept still, staring at his brother’s back, knowing he had done something wrong, but not sure what.

“How dare you,” said Connor evenly, looking over his shoulder, “think that I can’t recognize right and wrong because of that.”

“I never meant to suggest that!” Harry protested. *All the words out of my mouth are wrong lately, unless I’m speaking them to Draco. I can’t convince Snape to drop the charges, and I can’t convince Scrimgeour to do it, either, and I couldn’t convince Dad that I didn’t intend for this to happen.* “I only meant to say that I didn’t know you’d do this. And he was getting better, Connor. He really was. Remember the way he was concerned for us at Easter? And you should see some of the letters that he wrote me after the Second Task in the Triwizard Tournament—“

“And then he turned against you again,” said Connor, “when you went to the Ministry the night they were arrested.”

“How did you know about that?” Harry asked.

“I’m keeping in contact with Scrimgeour and the Aurors,” said Connor. “I’m interested in the progress of this trial, Harry, and I want to know everything I can about the procedures. You do realize that they’ll want to interview us before the trial actually begins? A few times, probably. Child abuse cases are very delicate. They’ll want to know what details we can speak about in public and which we absolutely can’t. I think Madam Shiverwood of the Department of Magical Family and Child Services will probably do it herself. After all, this is the family of the Boy-Who-Lived. Very high profile.”

Harry nodded slightly. “I guessed that.” It was the reason he’d been reading the books about interrogation techniques he’d found at Malfoy Manor. He would know what Madam Shiverwood was looking for, what signs would convince her he’d taken trauma from the abuse, and he planned to not display them. He knew he couldn’t stop the trial from occurring, and he couldn’t change the fact that they knew about his training now, but he could soften the blow. There weren’t many people who knew how he’d been affected by that training. The memories Snape had written down were only memories, and prejudiced by his perspective besides. If Harry could show he’d come out of those memories completely untraumatized, then he might encourage the Wizengamot and anyone who advised them, like Madam Shiverwood, to leniency.

He wouldn’t let them make him into a victim. He *wouldn’t*.

“Harry?”

Harry lifted his head and blinked. He hadn’t realized he’d been standing in the middle of the Weasleys’ garden staring at his feet. Nor had he realized that a beetle was zipping around his head, wings fanning his face purposefully, until he saw Connor’s amused gaze. The isolation wards didn’t keep animals out, Harry supposed, which was how his owl had been able to get through them.

As it happened, he’d sent a letter to Rita Skeeter asking her to come to the Burrow around noon in her Animagus form.

“Connor,” he said softly, “I have to do something important. Will you please go inside and leave me out here?”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “Harry—“

“I promise it doesn’t involve Apparating to the Ministry and trying to free Mum and Dad and Dumbledore,” said Harry, with a

smile that it hurt his face to give. “Nor does it involve hypnotizing myself to forget everything that happened in the past fourteen years. I know there are Aurors watching me, and I’m not going to try to get away from them. I just want to talk with someone. Please?”

Connor sighed, and nodded at him, and then gave him an abrupt hug that ended before Harry thought to pull away from it. “I wish you would accept more comfort than you let yourself,” he said, giving Harry a sad look that Harry couldn’t meet. “And, in fact, just to answer your question about James, yes, I do think he was trying to reconcile with us. But then he would have just turned away again the next moment some great pressure came and sat on him. He’s not dependable, Harry, and he’s a party to child abuse. That’s more than enough to convict him.”

Harry didn’t respond, though the beetle let out a shrill, high-pitched buzz that Harry could almost imagine was prurient interest. Connor didn’t seem to be waiting for an answer. He just nodded at Harry and walked towards the door of the Burrow, though he paused to add, “Don’t be too long, Harry. Mrs. Weasley makes the most *fantastic* meals.” He wore a dreamy expression as he shut the door behind him.

Harry immediately paced behind one of the thick old trees, so that Skeeter could change back without revealing she was an Animagus to do it. The reporter was walking beside him a moment later, patting at her thick blonde curls as if to make sure they hadn’t managed to tear themselves free. Her acid-green quill and her notebook were already hovering beside her.

“You had a story for me?” she asked Harry, staring directly into his face. “I suppose that you want to give your personal perspective on the story your brother spread around?”

“In a way,” said Harry, grateful again that he’d made Skeeter’s acquaintance. “I do want to give you an interview, or an article if you think that would do more good than an interview, and have you print it.”

Skeeter snorted and sat down on the tangled grass that covered the bank of a large pond. “Either would do plenty of good. Everyone’s going mad over this story. Honeywhistle grabbed the front page from me today, but she’s not going to do that all the time. I just have to get a unique angle or something no one else knows, and we’re off to the races.” She looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry nodded as he dropped down opposite her. “Then the interview. You ask me some questions, and I’ll give you honest answers.”

He could see Skeeter’s nose twitching, like the nose of a rat who scented cheese, and suspected she wanted to know why he was doing this. But, in the end, reporter’s curiosity proved too much. Besides, he could almost hear her thinking, it would get her the front page. Why should she care how she got it? Her newfound commitment to truth wouldn’t have limited her ambition.

“All right, then. How do you feel about the abuse being front-page news?” Skeeter asked.

Harry concealed a flinch as best he could at this evidence that Skeeter, too, was misunderstanding the situation. But that was why he’d sent his letter to her. He wanted everyone to know the *real* truth, and this was his best chance to do it.

I wish you wouldn’t do this, Regulus whispered in his head. He wasn’t often there anymore, and he sounded exhausted when he was. He said that Harry’s refusal to see the truth wearied him. *You know she’ll refuse to print it.*

No, she won’t, Harry thought at him, and told Skeeter, “It’s horrible. I don’t like the attention. And what makes it even worse is that everyone is misunderstanding the situation.”

Skeeter’s eyebrows shot up eagerly as her quill dashed across the paper. “What do you mean by that, Mr. Potter?” she asked, in a soothing, professional voice.

“I wasn’t abused,” said Harry.

Skeeter paused. Her quill stopped scribbling. She frowned at Harry as if he were an unknown species of beetle who’d flown up and tried to communicate with her while she was in her Animagus form. “Yes, you were,” she said.

Merlin, not her, too. Harry kept his face still, though. Even if Skeeter privately believed something different, he knew that she could spin the truth. They’d done it successfully after Fudge had abducted him. “No, I really wasn’t,” he said. “Do you know what the purpose of my training was?”

“Is that what you call it?” The quill made a note, which caused Harry to relax. They were back on track now.

“Yes,” said Harry, “because that’s what it was. My brother is the Boy-Who-Lived, you know—of course you know that—and my parents were worried that Voldemort might come back and kill him. So they trained me to help protect him.” He winced at this betrayal of one of his old vows, but that was, essentially, one that had got broken when he was still a student in first year. “I had powerful magic, and I wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived. I could help. So that was what the training was about, and of course it was strict. After all, how do you make a child understand that life and death are at stake if you aren’t strict?”

Harry was proud of himself for that. He’d got to the end of the speech without his voice wavering or breaking. He sounded as if he were fondly amused with himself, rather like a parent. He looked up to meet Skeeter’s eyes.

Skeeter hadn’t written anything of his speech down. She sat back, with her arms folded, and she was glaring at him through her ridiculously large glasses.

“I’m not publishing that,” she said.

Harry swallowed. “But it’s the truth.”

“It’s how you see things,” Skeeter corrected him. “I’ve heard and seen the most awful things about your past, Potter. You *were* abused. Even that article you gave me to blackmail your father with showed it. I didn’t know anything for certain then, or I would have gone ahead and pushed and exposed it.” For a moment, a dreamy expression covered her face. “That would be something, to have discovered it all by myself,” she muttered, and then shook her head. “The thing is, I *do* have morals, even if you don’t think I do. And I can recognize child abuse, because I’ve covered cases of it before. True, the parents are usually slapping the children around or raping them instead of—this. But this is still abuse, Potter.”

“You said that you would print an interview with me.” Harry clung to the slender threads of hope he’d first spun when he summoned Skeeter here. This was one of the few chances that he might have to influence the course of the trial in public. Most of the people around him would be howling for blood and refusing to acknowledge the nuances of the situation. Even Draco didn’t agree with him about those nuances, though Harry only knew that from long, slow looks that reminded him of those long, slow looks of his mother’s. “And that’s what I really believe. I promise you.”

“It’s what you believe because your parents and your Headmaster trained you to believe it,” said Skeeter, and now she was looking straight at him, and there was pity in her eyes.

“No, it’s what I believe because that’s who *I* am,” Harry retorted, stung. *Do they really think I’m no more than a mindless puppet of my parents? That rather diminishes the heroic light they want to cast me in.* “And because I was the one who lived through it. I ought to know what I went through if anyone does.”

“Abused children are often among the last to recognize their situation,” said Skeeter, as if she were quoting a long-established truth. “I’m sorry, Potter. I’m not going to print what you just told me. The most I could do with it would be to print that you believed it, and no one else would believe it with you.”

“My parents and the Headmaster must have allies—“

Skeeter snorted. “And do you think that they’re getting an *airing* right now, Potter? Yes, there are some people who will testify on their behalf. But this is *news*. The respected Headmaster and Light Lord an abuser of children! James and Lily Potter, whom everyone was sure must have been model parents to have raised the Boy-Who-Lived and the Young Hero—“

“Merlin, I’m not—“

Skeeter ignored him. “And it turns out they’ve been savagely abusing their children all along. No.” She stood. “I suppose that you might be able to change people’s minds in a short time, but not now. And I’m not going to be the one to help you change them. Your parents and Dumbledore deserve everything they get.”

“Skeeter—“ Harry could not believe she was doing this. Yes, he could see her point about covering child abuse cases in the past, but he had been sure that once he explained this wasn’t really a child abuse case, she would be amenable to doing as he asked. It would help her, too.

“No, Potter,” she said. “Talk to someone else about this. I won’t prevent that.” She made a disgusted noise deep in her throat. “As if I could prevent Honeywhistle and the rest from rolling dung every chance they get, anyway,” she said. “But I won’t join them anymore. I made myself a promise about a year ago, and I’ve kept my word so far. I’m not going to either make you look more like a victim than you are or like less of one. I want to print the truth, Potter, and there’s plenty of that still left.” She nodded at him, and then faded into her beetle form and was gone.

Harry sat in silence, staring at his hands, both false and real. A rustle of wings obscured his vision a few minutes later—at least, he thought it was a few minutes later—and Regina, Narcissa’s owl, landed beside him.

Harry unfolded her note with a feeling of dread, only accented by the sharp strokes with which Narcissa had written it.

Harry—

I did the best I could to keep them off until you were recovered, but seven of the wizards and witches from the alliance list I’ve created are here. They’re willing to wait until you return, and only one of them, Henrietta Bulstrode, insists on meeting you outside a common introduction. But they’re tired of excuses, and they’re going to be looking for blood.

I’m sorry. I know this is very far from the best day.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry nodded to Regina, said, “No response,” and watched as she climbed back into the air. He stared at the sun until his eyes watered and ran from that, and that only. Then he stood and walked back into the Burrow.

He would live. He would get through this. He would bear with the trial, and the Weasleys, and his new allies, and all that they could throw at him.

And if one tactic for convincing people of the truth failed, then he would just try another.

“Mr. Potter. I’m so happy to meet you. I’ve been waiting a long time.”

Harry held his chin up as he extended his hand. He had got through lunch with the Weasleys, as well as an impromptu game of Quidditch and “invitations” from the twins to try out their latest jokes, on sheer willpower. At least, with this woman, he could use the formal pureblood dances to bolster him. “Merlin’s smile on you, lady,” he murmured. “I am sure I must have been waiting a long time to meet you as well, though I did not know it.”

The woman walking across the anteroom to meet him buzzed like a swam of locusts, her magic lifting around her as she smiled. Harry would have known at once that she was trouble, even if her reputation hadn’t preceded her. Her magic was either as strong as Auror Mallory’s or not a good deal weaker. And she moved with the graceful, easy stride of a predator, fully in tune with her magic and confident of its possibilities.

Henrietta Bulstrode, Harry remembered as she took his wrist and he lifted her hand to his lips, was Adalrico’s second cousin—and thus distant enough from his immediate family that the alliance Harry had made with Adalrico, Elfrida, Millicent, and Marian didn’t affect her. She was an astoundingly forceful woman, and if she didn’t get her will one way, she would another. She’d never been a Death Eater because she killed three of them when they tried to recruit her.

Harry could remember being told that, but not that Henrietta was beautiful, with dark red hair on the edge of black and brown eyes like severing curses, and obviously used to using the beauty to get her own way. Or that her gaze flickered across Harry’s face and read several clues there that lit her expression with a fire Harry recognized. He’d last seen that flame burning behind Dumbledore’s eyes. Henrietta Bulstrode was an emotional manipulator, and would try to use any knowledge he gave her as a weapon, to better secure her own position.

No wonder Narcissa, standing politely in the far corner of the room while Henrietta introduced herself, looked so strained.

And no wonder that Henrietta began at once. “I was so sorry to hear about your parents, Mr. Potter,” she murmured. “That must have been hard, to have everyone finding out about the abuse all at once.”

Harry tensed, and did not let her see it. This would be shattering. After he greeted Henrietta, he had to go into the room behind her and meet his other new allies, as well as Hawthorn Parkinson, Adalrico and his family, and Arabella Zabini.

You'll survive. It's what you do best.

“The hardest thing was the betrayal,” he said. “To have my guardian give them up. I don’t like traitors much.”

Henrietta gave a quiver like a hunting hound straining against a leash, obviously eager for this dance to begin. “I should hope that you would never have to fear them again, Mr. Potter,” she said, as he let go of her hand.

Unless you're weak enough to deserve to fear them.

Harry could hear the words, and knew she knew that, and suppressed the urge to run away somewhere and hide his head in the sand. He wanted to curl up in Draco’s arms and sleep for a week. He wanted to cry. He wanted to just let the gathered pieces of himself collapse to the ground and wake up from this living nightmare.

But that was not going to happen. So he twisted his mind to meet the brutal dance that was upcoming.

“I do not *fear* traitors,” he said, giving the verb a light garnishing of emphasis that Henrietta would pick up. “Shall we meet the others, Mrs. Bulstrode?”

“In the Potter Alliance, you mean?” Henrietta had a small smile on her face. “Of course. Lead the way, Mr. Potter.” She could inflect her own verbs ironically, too, Harry thought.

He nodded to her, and went towards the sitting room where his allies awaited him, prepared to dance among knives.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Five: Change As the Winds Change

This room was not one that Harry had seen before, or perhaps it only looked different with so many people crowded into it. Harry didn’t have time to stare at the walls and figure that out. He was much too busy studying the people in the room with him, seated just far enough apart around a delicately carved wooden table to avoid crowding, and deciding whom he knew and whom he didn’t.

Hawthorn Parkinson was sitting on the side nearest him, her head turned to study him with intense hazel eyes. Harry knew part of their ferocity came from the impending full moon, and perhaps another part from seeing Henrietta Bulstrode behind him, but he feared at least half came from those memories she would have read. He dipped his head and looked carefully away from her.

The foot of the table, including one empty chair they must have left for Henrietta, was a mass of unfamiliar wizards and witches. Harry made out two other women, one of them marked by a springing mass of red curls, and four men, all of them dark-haired and more or less calm. Next to one of the men sat a dark-haired boy, bolt upright and staring at Harry with undisguised fascination. A slender, pretty girl had a chair behind another of the wizards, and close by the empty one was a girl at least a few years younger than Harry, her hands clasped together and her eyes on the floor. Harry nodded once to all of them in a general introduction, knowing he would have to meet them individually in a few short moments, and turned his attention to the other side of the table.

Oddly, it was a gaze from that direction that nearly broke him. Oh, not Lucius Malfoy, and not Arabella Zabini’s solemn look, and not Adalrico or Millicent. It was Elfrida Bulstrode, cradling a small shape on her arm that could only be her daughter Marian. Her eyes held a world of compassion that implored Harry to relax without making him feel as if she pitied him.

Harry looked quickly away. He didn’t want to seem rude, but, on the other hand, the last thing the alliance could afford was to have him break down because he badly wanted to talk to Millicent’s mother alone.

“I am very pleased to meet you,” he said, lifting his chin. “My name is Harry Potter, as you will know by now, elder son of Lily and James Potter, elder brother of the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“Son of a neglectful pureblood and abusive Muggleborn,” said Henrietta, just loud enough that it was hard to tell who had heard, as she slid past him to resume her seat at the bottom of the table.

Harry had been prepared for her to say something like that, though—he had her measure now—and simply inclined his head, perhaps responding to her comment and perhaps not. “Some of you I know already,” he said, and turned to smile at Hawthorn. “Mrs. Parkinson. I hope you have rested well in the wake of recent events?” He wasn’t sure how many people here would know about the death of her husband Dragonsbane, and he wasn’t about to expose it if she’d chosen to hide it.

“I have, Mr. Potter,” said Hawthorn. She had long since started calling him by his first name, but that was in front of more trusted allies than these, Harry thought. Right now, she would not appear to weaken him by calling him anything familiar. “Thank you for asking.”

Harry nodded, and then looked over at the Bulstrodes, deliberately meeting Adalrico’s eyes and not Elfrida’s. No one would think that strange. Elfrida was *puellaris*, devoted to the protection of her children, and deliberately supposed to appear timid and meek in public. Certainly the other allies would not expect her to take the lead in anything that happened today. “Mr. Bulstrode. I hope that I find you, your wife, and your heirs well?” It was no exposure to say that Marian was a magical heir, either; she must be, or she would not have been here.

“You do.” Adalrico was staring searchingly at him, as if looking for weakness. Harry raised his chin. *Search as you will, sir, you will not find it here. I am determined that I will not let you down.*

“Good,” said Harry, and moved on to Arabella Zabini. She had her hair done up in bells to prove that she was a Songstress—or so Harry assumed, since the bells were both larger and made of richer metal than he had seen her wear at Walpurgis Night or the Halloween meeting last year. “Mrs. Zabini. I was saddened to hear about the raid on your home. Are you any closer to catching the perpetrators?”

“I do believe that I know who they were.” Arabella gave him a charming smile. She was a beautiful woman, though Harry wondered how anyone could be lovely enough to snare the seven husbands she’d poisoned. “And my vengeance will take them when I am ready. Thank you for asking, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded at Lucius, and then turned to face the wizards and witches he did not know. “Sirs, madams,” he said. “Mrs. Malfoy tells me that you are willing to ally with me. But I know only names on a list, and very little about who you are and what you stand for as yet. If you would introduce yourselves?”

He turned to the wizard sitting closest to Lucius, who stood up at once, with a faint smile on his face as he examined Harry. His hair, eyes, and skin were all dark enough to suggest some ancestry not entirely British, which Harry had confirmed as soon as he murmured, “Thomas Rhangnara.” He glanced at the girl sitting behind his chair. “And this is my daughter and magical heir, Rose.”

The girl curtsied. Harry cocked his head at Thomas, whom he knew was the descendant of an Indian wizard who’d fled to Britain more than a hundred years ago. “If you don’t mind my asking, sir, I was unaware that your family claimed any particular allegiance to Light or Dark. What changed your mind?”

“I’ve spent most of my life trying to understand the difference between Light and Dark,” said Thomas simply. He still hadn’t stopped smiling, though his smile had a dreamy and more thoughtful edge to it now, as though he were thinking of something other than just the conversation in front of him. “And now I’ve finally decided that the Dark makes more sense.” He turned his hands up in front of him, as though he were surrendering, but the glow in his eyes said that wasn’t it. “Did you know that Merlin most probably united Dark and Light qualities within himself? And that no formal philosophy of the Light was formed until the middle of the thirteenth century, with no formal philosophy of the Dark coming until later? That—“

“Father,” said Rose Rhangnara, laying a hand on her father’s arm and giving Harry a look somewhere between embarrassed and apologetic. “I don’t think that Mr. Potter wants to hear *all* about your studies. He has other people to meet, after all.”

Thomas blinked, then smiled at his daughter, a more “present” smile than the other one he’d used. “You’re right, of course, my dear. Sorry,” he added to Harry, and then sat down.

Harry was breathing more easily than he’d expected as he turned to the next wizard in line. He thought he might like Thomas Rhangnara, though admittedly, the man might be the kind of distant philosopher who valued lives less than books, and that could cause problems.

This next wizard, from the white streaks in his dark hair, was older, enough that he evidently felt he could nod to Harry with a

slightly condescending look on his face, and didn't need to rise. "Edward Burke," he declared, then paused as though to let Harry make the obvious connection. When Harry said nothing in the next moment, Burke prompted, "Grandson of Herbert Burke, who married Belvina Black."

Harry made a slight "ah" noise under his breath, even as Regulus sneered in his head. *Of course he wants to claim some connection. The Burke family is hardly distinguished enough on its own to merit anyone's notice.*

Who's being a proud pureblood now? Harry snapped back at him, and nodded slightly to Burke. "We're honored to have you, sir. You are Declared Dark, I take it, and eager to renew your participation in politics?" One thing he knew for certain was that Burke was no Death Eater. He didn't get the slight tingling buzz in his scar that he did when he focused on Adalrico, Hawthorn, or Lucius.

"Yes." Burke frowned at Harry a bit. "And I have been most unfairly ignored, I *must* say. I was an Auror until Scrimgeour sacked me for using a bit of Dark magic on a prisoner. And until young Narcissa remembered me, I thought I would end my days in isolation. Really, *anyone* who approaches me and has the benefit of my experience would be gaining an invaluable ally, but not many people in the last twenty years have realized that."

Very proud, Harry noted, in the corner of his brain where he remembered things like that. *Handle him with care.* "I shall remember that, sir, and I'm sure that we'll call on you for many things as the months go by," he said smoothly, and then faced the young witch who sat at Burke's side even as he nodded in satisfaction.

This witch grinned at him. She had golden curls favored with the slightest touch of red, and incisive blue eyes, and a lion pendant hanging around her neck. It wasn't until Harry concentrated on it that he realized the pendant was a glamour. It glittered as realistically as it should have, were it really made of silver, but it passed through the top of her shirt instead of bouncing off it as she stood and made him a little impromptu curtsy.

"My name is Honoria Pemberley," she said. "And because I think that you must be tired of pompous speeches already—it doesn't take much to get *me* tired of them, I know—I'll just tell you everything that you need to know about me in short bursts." She rattled the next words off, as an illusion of a crown came into being above her head and then melted away in shimmers of gold and silver that became dancing serpents on her shoulders. "Gryffindor when I was in Hogwarts. Half-blood; my mother is a Muggle." Burke gave her a startled look and edged an inch away from her, which Honoria ignored merrily, though one of her illusory snakes stuck its tongue out at him. "Experienced illusionist, as you can see. Declared Dark because someone told me once that no halfbloods were ever Dark, which is just stupid."

Harry stared hard at her. She caught his eye and flicked her own gaze towards his left hand. Yes, her face said, she knew, but she wouldn't tell anyone. Unless it would be more fun that way, maybe.

Harry nodded cautiously back. He wasn't sure how far he could trust her.

"Tybalt Starrise sends his regards, by the way," Honoria added. "He's one of my best friends."

That only increased Harry's unease. Tybalt Starrise was not the...*stadiest* wizard in the world. Still, this meant that Honoria had connections with both Light and Dark families. That could make her useful to the alliance in the future.

"Welcome, Madam Pemberley," he began.

"Call me Honoria, *please*," said Honoria, and flicked her hair over her shoulder, at the same moment as two small bears stood up on her shoulders to dance. "Madam Pemberley is my mother, and I wish her joy of the title."

There's a story there, I think, Harry mused, but nodded. "Welcome, Honoria. I hope you find plenty of entertainment here," he couldn't help adding.

She grinned at him and sat down again. Henrietta was next, but she only nodded coolly to the girl sitting behind her.

"Mr. Potter and I have already met," she said, managing to make it sound like a special privilege instead of something she had arranged. "But he has not met my daughter Edith, my magical heir. Edith, stand up and curtsy for Mr. Potter."

Her voice held the snap of someone expecting instant obedience, and Edith did indeed obey at once, trembling a little as she stood. Harry didn't think she could be more than thirteen, and he was certain that she must attend Durmstrang or Beauxbatons,

since he'd never seen her at Hogwarts. Her eyes rose to his face, huge and wondering, and then slid away again as her mother commanded her back to her chair with a subtle pinch to her elbow.

Harry was already certain, as Henrietta Bulstrode sat down and focused on him, that he did not like her very much.

He moved past the awkward moment by looking at the thin and very neatly attired wizard next to Henrietta. He just bowed his head an inch, without bothering to stand up. His face had a cultivated bored expression. His eyes were green, Harry thought, or that shade of blue that could shift to green with the right light. His hair was dark and bound with a curling serpent of silver.

"Mortimer Belville," he said, and then paused, as though that should be enough for Harry to know who he was.

Harry simply nodded, not revealing his private thoughts. His mother had told him of the Belvilles, a mostly older family, with Mortimer their only heir. Mortimer was Snape's age, and had never married or joined. He seemed to like the thought of playing around and teasing his older relatives with the prospect of the family line not continuing until he was in his fifties or so.

He had also fled the country during Voldemort's War—no, during the First War, Harry supposed he must call it now. Taken no stand at all, and exhibited neither courage of conviction nor of principle. Harry supposed he could think of him as sensible, but he didn't think he could trust him to stand firm.

Well, needs must when the nundu comes prowling, he thought, and nodded to Mortimer. "Mr. Belville," he said. "I have heard much about you." He left Mortimer looking pleased, though Henrietta appeared an inch from laughter, and focused on the red-haired witch.

She stood and gave him a different bow than the others, her hands clasped in front of her as though cupping a bowl of water. "Ignifer Apollonis."

Harry knew that he blinked and stared, but he couldn't really help that, either. It wasn't every day that he met someone his mother had used to frighten him with childhood tales of—someone who had been reared Light, in one of the oldest and proudest pureblood families of Ireland, and then turned to the Dark when she was nearly twenty.

Ignifer's hair was red, her eyes golden, and her English very slightly accented with something that didn't sound like the usual Irish lilt. Harry supposed there was some truth to the idea that the Apollonis children were taught to speak Latin before any other language. She stood very straight when she recovered from the bow, and Harry could see no trace of any sense of humor in her face. He supposed she was another person he would have to handle carefully.

He thought for a moment, and found the greeting words that were used for a powerful, potentially unfriendly Dark witch met under unfamiliar circumstances. "May you have dark water and stones, my lady, to quench your thirst and test your strength."

The faintest of smiles crossed Ignifer's face, like sunlight in midwinter. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," she said, and then sat back down, evidently pleased that he took her as a Dark witch, without pausing to question her Light heritage. Harry doubted the impression would last long, though. Ignifer struck him as too inflexible for that.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry turned to look at the last wizard, the one with the boy behind him. He had dark hair and eyes that looked familiar, though Harry couldn't say why until the wizard rose, bowed, and said, "Charles Rosier-Henlin." He *did* look something like a saner Evan Rosier.

Charles straightened back up and locked eyes with Harry in an intense, testing gaze. Harry felt the brush of Legilimency, and bounced it off without thought, using a milder Occlumency shield than usual, just so that he wouldn't bruise his ally's mind. Charles blinked, but turned without explanation to introduce his son. "This is Owen, the elder of my twin boys and my magical heir. You wouldn't have met him. He's attended Durmstrang all his life."

Owen nodded to Harry. Harry thought he was a year older than himself, but he too obviously had to subdue awe. "Heard about what you did in the Triwizard Tournament," he murmured. "Wonderful, Potter." He looked away again the moment he could politely do so.

Harry hoped he hid a frown. He didn't want the kind of constant, subtle testing from his allies that Henrietta seemed prone to, but neither did he want cringing or fawning. Why they couldn't simply be equals, true allies, was beyond him. His own power was set

off by his youth and the stories circulating about him right now.

“Welcome, sir,” he told Charles. “And I hope to know your son better. Do you play Quidditch, Owen?”

That brought Owen’s head up in startlement. “Beater,” he said, without thinking about it, and then flushed. “You?”

“Seeker for Slytherin,” said Harry, with an encouraging smile. “Though probably not half as good as Viktor Krum. I saw him at the Quidditch World Cup this past summer.”

Owen relaxed a bit, and nodded. “And doesn’t he know that he’s good! I’m almost glad that he’ll be gone this year, even though it’ll make our trainers harder on us all, so that we can have another player as good as he was.”

Harry clucked his tongue. “I know all about that,” he said, thinking of the way Snape had encouraged him to play Quidditch, and win, against his will. These memories were distant enough that they didn’t cause him as much pain. “Sometimes we forget it’s supposed to be a *team* effort, I think, with all the focus on individual positions.”

“Funny,” Henrietta murmured, a touch of poison in her voice. “I hadn’t thought that we came here to discuss Quidditch.”

Owen flushed, and Charles snapped his head to the side to glare, but Harry was actually grateful that she’d interrupted there rather than elsewhere in the conversation. It made a graceful segue. “No,” he said equably. “But we came here to discuss a team effort, Mrs. Bulstrode, I think.”

He turned and took the chair at the head of the table, beside Narcissa, silently calling for Fawkes as he did so. The phoenix alighted on his shoulder with a croon a moment later, and Harry scratched his feathers, smiling as he noticed that Burke, Henrietta, and Mortimer had all jumped, but that Owen was staring at the phoenix in fascination, and Honoria in delight. A moment later, the illusions around Honoria began to swarm with red and gold flames just the same color as Fawkes’s feathers. Fawkes squawked at her, and Honoria opened her mouth in a soundless laugh.

“We came here to discuss our alliance,” said Harry, raising his brows and looking from face to face as he waited for an interruption. He found none ready and waiting, so he nodded. “We may as well do so.”

It was getting harder and harder for Hawthorn to sit on her anger and worry.

Since she had read the memories Snape had sent her, she had wanted to kill something. The urge only grew worse as the full moon came nearer, and the wolf inside her joined its voice to hers, whispering, urging her on a quest for blood and raw flesh, preferably still screaming as it went down her throat.

Hawthorn wanted to rip apart Harry’s parents for what they had done, and Headmaster Dumbledore for what *he* had done, and anyone who had had anything to do with the concealment of this, and she had believed that she knew what rage was when she felt this emotion.

But no, she hadn’t. She didn’t know what rage was until she watched Harry walk into the meeting room at Malfoy Manor and confront his new allies.

She could only stare and murmur a few inconsequential words when Harry greeted her. She was nearly sick with the scents of pain and exhaustion and panic swarming around him. Sometimes, having a werewolf’s nose was a blessing, but not this time. She knew exactly how much Harry needed to rest, and it was distracting her during a very important time.

That wouldn’t do.

By the time Harry had worked his way around the table to Honoria Pemberley, Hawthorn had got control of herself back, but that just meant she had more room to focus on Henrietta Bulstrode and snarl a bit. She didn’t trust the woman. She wasn’t sure why Narcissa had included her in her recruitment efforts, save that she was too powerful to be ignored.

Calm, Hawthorn ordered herself sharply. You’re thinking and reacting as though Harry were your own son, instead of your leader. He needs your support now, not you snapping out of your chair because you’re angry every time someone acts like the witch or wizard you know they are. That means that if Henrietta challenges his authority, you come up with plans to help deflect

her challenges.

But it was hard, it was very hard, to watch Harry take his place and know how badly he needed help—and that he couldn't show any of that, lest someone should take advantage of it and use it to harm him.

Perhaps this is what was missing from my alliance with Voldemort. The thought darted unexpectedly into Hawthorn's head as the phoenix appeared on his shoulder and Harry began to speak. *This feeling of actual protectiveness, love, comradeship. I know that we told Harry the wizards and witches who follow and protect someone with Lord-level power are supposed to be companions, not just the mindless lackeys Voldemort made the Death Eaters into, but I didn't know I would ever feel this so strongly.*

She found some comfort in that idea, though it would have been easier without the wolf in her head snarling *blood, kill, murder them, bite them...*

Harry could see no better way to start than with honesty. There were some things that he would need to conceal, of course, but what he could tell, he should. That way, any of his new allies—he couldn't help flicking a glance at Henrietta—who were dissatisfied with the way he saw things could abandon him now, without claiming they'd been deceived and becoming traitors.

"First of all, just to clear up any misconceptions, I am *not* going to become a Dark Lord," he began. "I'm not going to Declare for either Dark or Light, and I'm not going to become a Lord. And I am fighting Voldemort." Most everybody still flinched at the name, save the people who had been Death Eaters. Harry noted that. He wouldn't want to use it too often, but as a weapon to throw people off balance, it could be useful. "If you do need to follow a Lord, or you entertain some hope of compromise with that madman, then you need to leave the alliance."

He paused. No one made for the door. Of course, these were Dark wizards and witches accustomed to seeking advantage wherever they could find it, with perhaps the exception of Ignifer. He was not going to flush them out so easily.

So he went for another tactic.

"I don't intend for my war against Voldemort to be reactive, either," he said quietly. "I *will* carry this on the offensive." He was getting stares even from his long-time allies for that declaration, Harry knew. He supposed it came from their knowledge of his past and their assuming he would be preoccupied in dealing with that. Well, they were wrong. He would not let the people who were so eager to make him a victim define him that way. "I have an advantage that will allow me to do that."

He waited a moment, wondering who would ask it.

"What is that advantage?"

Arabella Zabini. Interesting. Perhaps she does not trust me completely yet, despite what Narcissa told me yesterday about her allying herself more firmly with me. Harry chose his words very carefully. This was the most dangerous part of what he had to do, and if he became caught in an obvious lie, his allies would distrust him at best. "I have a—connection with one of the Death Eaters who has left the Dark Lord's ranks," he said. "Evan Rosier is his name."

Charles leaned forward sharply. "You cannot trust my cousin," he said. "He is completely mad."

"Mad, to be sure," Harry agreed, "but it is a riddling madness. He scatters clues in the letters he writes me, and he cannot stop writing me those letters. It's a sort of compulsion with him. He did warn me, outright, about what would happen in the graveyard where the Dark Lord resurrected himself, and even told me the nature of the magic he would use. I did not interpret another of his hints the right way, or I should have been forewarned."

"What good are clues that you can only know about later?" Henrietta Bulstrode asked, her voice a drawl, her eyes half-lidded. "Unless you bring the letters to your elders, of course, and have them interpret them for you."

Harry held onto his temper. It was easier than Henrietta seemed to assume it was, from the way she taunted him, and drew attention to something obvious—his age. She did not consider him a very formidable opponent yet.

Shall I disillusion her?

“He has left the Dark Lord entirely now,” said Harry. “He turned in the graveyard, and tried to kill Bellatrix LeStrange. He didn’t succeed—“

“Nor will he,” said Narcissa. “Bellatrix is mine.”

She wasn’t making that declaration so much to him, Harry surmised, as to the rest of the wizards and witches. Glances flitted from face to face, and heads were bowed, and Harry simply nodded to Narcissa and continued in the middle of that glancing and thinking.

“He has sent me another letter since then. That one enabled me to prevent the death of Rufus Scrimgeour.”

“That is something we really must settle, Potter.” Burke, unsurprisingly, frowning at him. “Why are you on such good terms with the Minister? He’s a Light wizard, and you know they’re all treacherous bastards—“

“Who are, nonetheless, grateful to the people who help engineer their elections.” Harry raised his eyebrows. *Time to move a bit on the offensive, I think.* “Or did you not read the papers last year, Mr. Burke? After Minister Fudge kidnapped me, Rufus Scrimgeour was one of those who supported me throughout Fudge’s trial and the trial of my guardian. Scrimgeour knows that he owes a good deal of his success to the way I testified at the first trial. And if he has done me favors in return—well. They weren’t necessarily favors that strict Light wizards would approve of.” Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about Scrimgeour. The newspapers would have told you that.”

Honoria laughed outright at the expression on Burke’s face. Ignifer, though, shifted, and drew Harry’s eye to her before she spoke.

“And what about what the newspapers are saying now, Potter?” she challenged. “About your abuse by your parents, and Albus Dumbledore? Can we trust you to bear through all of that just as casually?”

At least she’s direct, Harry thought, and reached deeply into the reserves of his will and strength, using them to paint an indifferent, almost bored expression on his face. The best thing he could do was to show that this didn’t matter to him. In fact, it would be good practice for the dancing he intended to do around Madam Shiverwood and others who might question him. Show no marks, and it would frustrate anyone who looked for wounds.

“Of course,” he said. “The timing *is* damn inconvenient. I could have wished my guardian would wait. I have a war to fight.” He shrugged, while Ignifer stared hard at him, and met her gaze for gaze. “I consider myself a warrior first, as well as *vates* for the magical creatures,” he said quietly. “But since he didn’t wait, then I will handle it. I have a chance now, finally, to show everyone that I’m not just an appendage to my brother, the Boy-Who-Lived, and not just prone to occasional newsworthy events, either. The former Minister took me for a child last year. That was his mistake.” He lifted his eyebrows and flicked a glance up the table. “I would hate to see anyone here make the same mistake.”

Thomas Rhangnara nodded as if impressed. Arabella Zabini lowered her eyes, frowning thoughtfully. Edward Burke pursed his lips. Most of the others sat immobile and blank-faced.

Not Ignifer, of course.

“You’re an abused child, Potter,” she insisted. “You must be aware that most of the wizarding world will see you that way.”

Harry forced himself to smile. He hoped that it wasn’t too bright, wasn’t too brittle, but he could only hold onto it and hope. It was beyond him right now to make absolutely *sure* that his smile was convincing, and he didn’t know the minds of his new allies well enough yet to realize what would allay their doubts beyond another murmur.

“They’ll see me that way,” he said, his voice just above a breath. He could sound more confident like that, especially when he forced them to lean closer to hear him. “That doesn’t mean I’m *really* that way, does it? Someone can think a diamond a piece of quartz all he likes, but that doesn’t mean the diamond will shatter when he puts it under a compression spell.”

Ignifer subsided, apparently satisfied. Adalrico Bulstrode immediately took up the thread of the same conversation, though, as if he wasn’t.

“Potter,” he said hesitantly, “you must know that *we*, at least, would follow you down much further than you have gone so far.” He glanced at the rest of the table, and explained, “Potter saved my wife’s life and power when she drained herself to make

Marian her magical heir.” He turned back, and Harry forced himself to meet that dark, burning gaze. It was harder than with any of the others, since he knew one of the flames behind that gaze was frantic concern. “But that means that you must be strong enough to lead. Are you truly that way?”

Harry curled his lip. *I told you, look as hard as you can, and you will find no weakness in me.* “I am, Mr. Bulstrode,” he said, keeping his voice curt. “The war is the important thing to me, and the revolution I intend to introduce once I have enough consent from both wizards and magical creatures to make it a reality. The future, not the past. I have no intention of looking back until I must, and then I’ll deal with the husks of my parents and the Headmaster, and go on.”

He concentrated on Adalrico’s face until he nodded, reluctantly, and then looked around the table again. “Does anyone else have anything to say?”

No one apparently did. Harry passed on to outlining the first of his plans against Voldemort.

“The Black estates are ours, thanks to an ally whom most of you will eventually meet—“

Hinting at me? Regulus mocked him. Refusing to talk about me outright? I’m hurt.

Shut it, you. “And I plan to use at least a few of them as bases in striking against Voldemort. The magical weapons within them will also prove useful, once we can train in them. I believe that we can even lure Voldemort into traps using the rumors of them. If he thinks that anything can harm him, he will want to capture or neutralize it. We must not underestimate the power of rumor...”

Hawthorn shook her head as Harry went on outlining his plans. They sounded good. Of course they did. The boy had obviously thought about this, and he did have some natural touch of leadership when he chose to apply himself. He led best when no one was reminding him that he led.

But she had seen the gazes that passed from eye to eye, even as Harry engaged in his staring contest with Adalrico, and she knew that not everyone was as convinced as he would like them to be. For that matter, Hawthorn herself did not think the trials were a mere inconvenience to him.

We are not following simply an abused child, she thought, as she studied Harry and compared his confident words to the scent of pain and turmoil flooding from him. But we are following a leader who will not allow himself to rest. I very much fear that he will run himself to death before he attends to his own wounds. Someone must make him face that truth.

I am not sure who could.

Hawthorn sighed, and returned to listening to her wolf. At least bloodthirsty thoughts of vengeance filled her with more cheer than the fact that Harry was bleeding and would not stop for bandages.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Intermission: Four Wizards, Three Witches

The clash of skillets greeted Charles as he stepped through his fireplace with Owen beside him. He wasn’t surprised. Medusa would have tried to cook while they were gone, because she had the odd idea—acquired from one of the thousands of books upstairs—that it was the duty of a pureblood wife to cook dinner for her husband when he went to a formal alliance meeting.

And then, of course, Michael, who despised his mother’s cooking, would have crept into the kitchen and stolen one of her pans, so that she would be forced to leave it up to the house elves.

Charles held a finger to his lips, which Owen understood. He grinned, then followed silently behind his father as Charles went to the door of the kitchen and peered around the wall.

Michael and Medusa, sure enough, were dueling with their skillets while all around them agitated house elves tried to keep pots from boiling over and half a dozen different baking projects from burning. Michael laughed openly, his dark hair falling across his eyes as he leaped and dodged. He was identical to Owen, but, maybe because the weight of responsibility on him had been

less, far merrier.

Charles had to smile as he looked at his wife. She would hate the reasons behind the expression, but there it was; it was the prerogative of spouses to hate each other sometimes. The woman who had been Medusa Bulstrode when he married her still had laugh lines around her mouth and worry lines around her eyes, though right now her heavy brown hair was far more tangled than it had been on their wedding day. She darted forward, swinging her skillet at her son's knees, and, as Michael dodged to block her, caught him a smart rap on the shoulder.

"Owww, *Mum!*" Michael complained, even as his arm went numb and he dropped his weapon.

Medusa danced in triumph, turning to say something sharp to him—doubtless about how he should respect his mother more—and then caught sight of Charles and Owen. In an instant, she'd handed her own skillet to an elf and advanced to kiss Charles on the cheek, trying hard to calm the flush on her face into something more demure. "Greetings, dear," she said. "I trust the meeting went well?"

Just this once, Charles didn't want her to put on the mask. He held her shoulders, kissed her until he heard his sons make gagging noises, and then shooed them away. Medusa watched him questioningly, the more so when he led her out of the kitchens. "The cake—" she started.

"Was going to burn anyway," Charles finished.

She crossed her arms and huffed at him.

Charles embraced her in silence, letting his head rest on her shoulder. Medusa went quite still for a moment, then stroked his hair. This was why they had the kind of marriage they did, Charles thought, relaxing from more than the touch. They complemented each other, and they did it very well. The moment he arrived home agitated, Medusa would know, and seek to calm him. And when her false worry gave way to the real thing, then he took her in his arms and rocked her until she could stand on her own.

"More real than you expected?" Medusa whispered, standing on her toes so she could speak directly into his ear.

And that was it, that was *exactly* it, though Charles hadn't known it until she said the words. "Yes," he said, his arms tightening fiercely around her. "Yes, it was."

Medusa didn't question him again, but stood and let him hold her, while Charles's mind sped intensely over everything he'd seen for the last few hours.

Oh, he'd agreed to the alliance with Narcissa Malfoy *thinking* he knew what it meant. He had no reason to be fond of the Dark Lord. He'd spent all the Rosier-Henlin money donated to his cause in the last war with a reckless lack of care, and he'd killed one of Charles's own nephews in a raid at the height of his power, when he regularly underestimated the readiness of the Aurors. Dumbledore wasn't attractive either, though, and any third way would have sounded like bell music to his ears.

And then had come the stories about Harry Potter being abused. Charles had blinked, but still thought he knew what it meant—that the alliance would just be a little harder, that was all, and the adults would guide the boy, use him more as a figurehead than anything else.

And then, today, he'd actually met Potter.

Such strength and such fragility, Charles thought, as Medusa guided him to a chair and sat him down in it, beginning to massage his shoulders. He'd seen the pallor and the dark circles beneath the boy's eyes, both indicating a lack of rest. He'd seen, in many ways, the fourteen-year-old wizard he'd expected. And Potter had made mistakes that he must not have known he was making, constant small missteps that would have been impossible if he knew more about the families and the backgrounds of his allies. He *did* need guidance and advice.

But the *magic*.

Charles had been near Albus Dumbledore only a few times—though one of those times had convinced him not to send Owen and Michael to Hogwarts—and the Dark Lord only once. He had forgotten, or perhaps just never known, the sheer intoxicating effect that power had when it was pouring off a Lord-level wizard, rotating around him in a visible aura. Charles's family saw such power as lightning, and he'd kept quiet throughout most of the meeting, not wanting to embarrass himself by revealing his

distraction. Harry Potter in the midst of a lightning storm took some getting used to.

And he was an Occlumens! That, Narcissa Malfoy had not reported; Charles wondered if she had known. He hadn't followed up on Charles's admittedly feeble Legilimency. Perhaps he was too tired.

Perhaps he had no need to. The phoenix on his shoulder would attest to that, and so would the confident way he laid out his plans.

And so Charles was left following an ally who could apparently fall any moment, but promised utter glory and rewards if he succeeded.

This is so real, he thought, as he laid his head on his wife's shoulder again. *So very real, and I wonder more than ever now what the Potters were thinking, to turn such power against them.*

Mortimer Belville settled his cloak carefully around his shoulders before he strode into Belville Hall. Portraits of his ancestors, and not the living things, sat around the room, but they would like to see him looking his best.

Murmurs of appreciation followed him as he made his way through the room, and Mortimer inclined his head, looking neither to the right nor the left. It didn't do to take too much notice of portraits; it only encouraged them. For the matter, he could say the same thing about his parents and grandparents.

He found several letters from said distinguished oldsters waiting on the table when he arrived in his private study, accompanied by flustered owls. Mortimer rolled his eyes and levitated treats to them from a distance. He didn't want to chance getting feathers and pellets on his clothes.

He sipped his wine as he read through the letters at a leisurely pace. They were all the usual bothersome notes, offering to introduce him to this young witch or that slightly older wizard. A blood child or a magical heir, that was what the family wanted. Preferably several of them, and they wanted them right now.

Mortimer snorted and let his head fall against the back of his chair, flexing his fingers around the wineglass. Why did none of them ever realize that he wasn't interested, not yet? Of course he had every intention of doing his duty by Belville when it was time. But he was only thirty-five, and a pureblood wizard. He had decades left to live, unless he did something stupid first.

And the one thing I am not is stupid.

Lazily, he levitated the history of Merlin he'd been reading last night over to himself and scanned the pages, smiling as many of the names on them rang bells of recognition in his memory. Most wizards would not even know who one of these people were, let alone twenty. Not even most of his fellow Ravenclaws in Hogwarts would have known. Mortimer delicately licked his finger and turned the page, enjoying the smell of ink and wine and silence.

All of them think they can control me. Even Potter does. I saw that from the way he looked at me. He thinks me small, of no account, just a tool for his ends. Ha, I say, and ha again.

I control them, not the other way around. Intelligence always wins, and I am more intelligent than anyone there.

Cradled by his confidence in how bloody *brilliant* he was, Mortimer settled in for a long afternoon of reading.

Too cold here. Too lifeless. Too without the noise and the light and the warmth that Edward Burke was already coming to think of as a necessary component of his life, ever since little Narcissa Malfoy had shown up at his door with just the right combination of admiration and judicious flattery to get him to join this alliance she was setting up.

Edward liked being flattered, of course he did, but that didn't mean he was just going to give in to it. One didn't do that, especially someone who was a son of the illustrious Burke line and a rightful heir, if he'd only chosen to press the claim, of the Black family.

He had to be courted. He had to be *won*. And someone with ties to Minister Scrimgeour, of all people—wasn't that a blasted

surprise, and just like a young wizard, all power and no sense?—would have to work harder than usual to win his support.

Edward stamped his foot and snapped his fingers irritably, so that the house elves would get into his bedroom and light the damned fire already. Honestly, sometimes he felt as though the disrespect which infested the outside world and made it an uncomfortable place for him to live had infested his own home. There was no other explanation as to why Tid couldn't have the fire in his bedroom already lit when he returned from an important meeting like this one.

He took his favorite chair, affecting to take no notice of Tid as the elf crept in and performed his duties. In reality, of course, he watched every movement, and noticed how long it took, and compared it to the quicker motions of the Malfoy house elves. More observant than most people thought him, that was Edward Burke all over.

And more able to look out for his own advantage, too.

Oh, he knew why Narcissa had approached him. She wanted the pressure of his family name, of one more Dark wizard making the alliance look attractive to other Dark wizards. He was a tool. He knew it.

Edward didn't mind. Or, well, he minded, but he knew better than to show he minded. He could wait. Slytherins were patient. Burkes were patient. Blacks were—well, not patient, but they could be ingenious.

He noticed *everything*. He'd noticed the way that Narcissa had seated him by the halfblood Pemberley girl, a subtle insult, when she knew that he couldn't abide Muggles or those polluted by their dirty blood. He'd noticed the way that most of the wizards around the table affected not to look at him. Intimidated, they were, by the thought of matching wits or stares with a scion of the Black and Burke lines.

He'd noticed when Potter didn't dare to make him stand up and bow like the others. He had the advantage there, no doubt about it.

And why shouldn't he? The Potter boy was halfblood, and everyone who was anyone knew that dirty blood clouded and dirtied the thoughts as much as it did one's ability to perform magic. Edward listened, and oh, Edward knew. He had heard the whispers. *Unnatural*, they said about his magic, and Edward was inclined to agree. No son of a Mudblood had any business having that much magic.

So, old Edward listened, and old Edward noticed, and old Edward knew. The Potter boy wasn't really anybody. He was a convenient puppet that the Malfoys had found. Most likely Lucius, the sly old crow. And they were manipulating him with just the right degree of incredulity. A fourteen-year-old wizard with Lord-level power, who put on a light show at Walpurgis? It sounded just ridiculous enough to be true. Merlin knew there were Dark wizards out there who would snatch at any chance that would get them clear of either Light wizards or Voldemort's power.

But such traps couldn't catch a wizard of Edward Burke's strength or discernment. He would watch a little longer, but he was already sure where his advantage lay with this alliance, and unless he uncovered something stunning about Potter, then he wouldn't hesitate to employ it.

A vates is a wizard poised between Dark and Light, one committed to freedom and unbinding. A vates is in an unusual position, because, while he must have enough power to declare himself a Lord, he must never do so. A Lord is committed to leadership, to ruling and governance, and may, of course, use compulsion for the ends of either the Dark or the Light. A vates must be committed to leadership only if it is the best course for those he would lead, and must never use compulsion at all. There has never been a vates in history who freed more than a few magical species, because of the difficulty of staying on this path...

Thomas Rhangnara pushed the book gently away from him, aware that excitement was making his hands, and thus the pages, vibrate. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, hooking his hands together behind his head, while fireworks burst in his mind.

That would be something, wouldn't it? Potter apparently embodies a philosophical problem come to life. I'm not sure I believe that he can tread this path, because no one ever has, but to see him tread it...

Thomas shot to his feet and paced around the library. At times like this, when he was so excited, he just couldn't sit still. He had been like this in the last days before he declared for Dark, too, because then the arguments were all starting to make sense, and

rushing together in his head towards some magnificent conclusion. He almost felt the same way now, though of course it was different; now, he hadn't studied for several years to get to this same place.

But there was a wizard walking around in the world who might be a vates.

How exciting was *that*?

Thomas knew he couldn't stay in the library any longer. He had to share this with *somebody*. He burst out of the library, nearly knocking down his eldest daughter, Melissa, who had just emerged from her bedroom. She steadied herself with a little cry, but her face softened the moment she looked up at him. Thomas smiled back at her. His children all knew his expression when he'd just learned something new, and all of them were perfectly willing to listen to him, too. Thomas often felt blessed, but never more so than when Robert, or Melissa, or Rose, or Charis, or Albert, all showed that his thoughts were important to them.

"What is it, Daddy?" Melissa hooked her arm in his and turned him back towards the library.

Thomas began explaining what a *vates* was to her, and how Potter might become one. Melissa listened and made admiring noises until Priscilla opened the door to announce that she was back from the Ministry, and why hadn't Thomas made dinner yet?

But when she found him on his favorite chair, with Melissa on the stool at his feet, Priscilla simply rolled her eyes and kissed him on the brow and said, "Meeting go well, dear?"

Thomas leaned back and grinned happily at his Auror wife. "Very."

Priscilla kissed him again. "Good. Now, perhaps we can get something to eat? I'm very hungry. We chased a bastard today who went over five roofs in a row before we finally caught him."

Thomas stood up and started to walk out of the library, but Melissa and Priscilla both made him, as always, leave the books where they were, instead of bringing them to the dinner table. Thomas had to be content with chattering to his wife and daughter—and the other children, who soon joined them—about why he felt the meeting had gone so well.

This is just so interesting. If nothing else, I am going to owe Potter for making my life so interesting.

Ignifer Apollonis straightened her back and held absolutely still. Her mother was the one who had firecalled *her*. That meant Artemis Apollonis could well and good state her business, or she could go away.

Her mother's face, highlighted in the flames, was the mirror image of her own, save that Ignifer was keeping her face inflexible, and Artemis was frowning. And she was starting the same speech she made every day, the one that made Ignifer grind her teeth. But it would have been cowardly to refuse to allow her mother to firecall her, and Ignifer was not a coward.

"All you have to do is kneel before your father and say you're sorry, that you apologize," said Artemis. "That's *all*, Ignifer. Sweet Minerva, I would not have accounted for anyone being so stubborn, let alone a sweet girl raised to honor and revere the Light and her parents."

It was word-for-word what she had said yesterday, and the day before, and the week before that, and so on and back for fifteen years. Ignifer gave the same answer she'd given yesterday, and the day before that, and the week before that, and so on and back for fifteen years. "The Dark, and not the Light, saved my life." She could feel, as if it were still present, the immense, fallen stone block pressing down on her chest, crushing the breath and the feeling and the life out of her. She could feel herself reaching out desperately with all the magic she was trained to use, and accomplishing nothing. She could hear the wind as the wild Dark, called in desperation, came to her and levitated the remains of the house she'd been in when the Death Eaters struck off her. "I promised that I would serve it if it did. And you always taught me to keep my promises."

Artemis flinched, the same way she always did. "You will never have children until your father calls the sterility curse back, Ignifer. And you know that he will only do that if you kneel before him and make submission and swear to return to the Light."

"Then he won't call it back," said Ignifer. "And he won't have grandchildren, either, nor any more magical heirs, since I am his. Goodbye, Mother."

Neither courage nor politeness forbade her willing the flames out of existence, and thus ending the connection. Ignifer had been friends with fire since the earliest days of her childhood; it was how her accidental magic had manifested, and still the easiest weapon for her to fling in battle. She turned her back on the hearth now and paced over to sit in her favorite chair under the far wall, the one Artemis had to look at when she peered through the Floo. Ignifer had decorated it the way it was on purpose, of course.

The wall was painted black wood, hung with gleaming shards of obsidian and ebony and jet, deep green or deep purple leaves charmed to stay fresh, and black roses and belladonna and other plants used in brewing potions that had nothing but an evil purpose. Ignifer put her head back and took in the sight and scent of them until she felt slightly calmer.

Then she took up the sword that hung low on the wall—dark wooden hilt, shining blade made of Damascus steel—and passed through the door behind the chair. She felt a brief, dizzying moment of flight, and then she landed in another place entirely, a place with high mountains in the background and shimmering heat in the air, warmer than Great Britain would ever get. Ignifer shook her hair behind her shoulders with a slight smile. There were advantages to charming a door in her home to act as a Portkey.

A small, copper-colored dragon thrust its head around the boulder in front of the door, and bared its venomous fangs at her. Ignifer grinned and lifted the sword. The Peruvian Vipertooth slithered towards her, head up and neck swaying back and forth.

There was no better exercise, Ignifer thought as she spun around in a circle and thrust the sword hard against the scales, knowing it would be deflected, than dueling for one's life with a dragon when one wanted to use the body and the mind to their utmost at the same time.

Circle. Duck. Roll as the fangs came stabbing down in the dirt behind her. The tail, watch the tail.

This Potter was intriguing, and the alliance did seem more interesting than Ignifer had assumed at first. She had no love for Voldemort, but then, she had no love for most of the Dark wizards her new Declaration had made her sister to, either. They watched her with distrust in their eyes, always. At least Narcissa had approached her with proper reverence for her classical education and her affinity with fire, both of which she admitted could be useful in making alliances and in giving battle.

Leap, duck, turn, now, circle now, and down, nearly stabbing it in the eye before the dragon jerked back with a pained squeal.

And if what the alliance seemed to promise her was the real thing—

A stunning blow as the tail caught her along the ribs, but she'd deserved that; she really hadn't been paying attention. Roll, drop to one knee, let the tail go overhead this time. It really was as easy as declining manus.

--then Ignifer could only welcome it. She had always known her place when she was of the Light, known who she belonged to and who her enemies were and who she could depend on. And since turning to the Dark, she'd been floundering, keeping her feet mostly by refusing to bend or break.

A second dragon coming now. Call fire, and her hands were flaring with it, and the dragons were hesitating to approach.

If she had siblings, friends, allies, even a Lord whom she would serve as if he were a Lord despite the title he refused, then she could belong again. She could stop being so lonely, stop encasing herself in rock that she knew would make her bleed to death in the end.

And there came a Dragon Keeper, waving his arms furiously at her. None of them had a sense of humor about dueling dragons for exercise, even though she never killed one of them. Time to go.

Ignifer pushed her hair out of her eyes as she landed back in her own house. She felt more relaxed, now, enough to let some of the impressions of Potter she'd formed without knowing it dance before her eyes.

He's encasing himself in rock, too, bleeding to death behind a mask of strength. Perhaps I can help him recover from that, as long as he's offering me a place at his side.

Honorina Pemberley stood in her entrance hall, hidden behind an illusion, and watched her father's eagle-owl vainly scan the room

for her. It had been a while since she got good enough to fool owls, but it was still a new enough trick to delight her.

Of course, a giggle escaped her lips at last, and the owl fluttered over and deposited the letter in front of her, flying away without waiting to be paid. Honoria let that illusion fall, chucking all the while, and looked at the letter. She rolled her eyes when she recognized her mother's handwriting on the outside of it.

Her mother, Mary, was a Muggle, but she acted as proud as any pureblood wizard born to the bloodline, Honoria thought, while she created a line of small faces all sticking their tongues out at the letter. Above all, she was insistent that her daughter have blood children. No adopted magical heirs would do. She wanted grandchildren who were actually Pemberley by birth. And she had persuaded her husband, Honoria's father, to the same way of thinking.

Since Honoria liked women, this was somewhat of a problem.

Honoria knew what the letter would say. *Honor of the family blah blah blah, blood children blah blah blah, not welcome home until you marry some nice young wizard blah blah blah.* It wasn't worth opening it, not even for a laugh. Her mother was tiresomely regular.

Honoria cast the letter into the flames, and then, since she was there anyway, opened up the Floo Network and went to Tybalt's house. He came to her eagerly, almost before the house elf who received her could call him. He clasped her shoulders, gave her a ridiculously lascivious kiss on the cheek that his partner John always pretended to scowl and grumble at, and then stepped back and looked at her expectantly.

"How did the meeting with Harry go?" he asked.

"Oh, you call him Harry, now?" Honoria shook the soot from her cloak and hung it up on the rack near at hand, creating an illusion of another one around her shoulders. "Isn't he a bit young for you?"

Tybalt smacked her hand. "I'm very joined, thank you. I just want to know how he is."

"Bad," said Honoria simply, thinking of how the glamour that hid the boy's cut-off left hand had wavered even as she looked at it. "Like he's about to collapse. Did you know that he'd had his left hand cut off?"

Tybalt stared at her.

"I guess not," Honoria concluded.

"Sweet Merlin." Tybalt stepped back and sat down on one of the shallow divans near the fire, frowning broodingly. "And then the charges against his parents. He's not having a good month, I would guess."

"No, and it'll get worse before it gets better." Honoria sat down on the divan across from her friend. She had never forgotten, never would forget, that Tybalt had been the first to open his home to her after her own parents had thrown her out. She owed him the entire truth, even though she figured Potter probably wouldn't have wanted her to tell it. "And you know that I'm practiced at seeing through other kinds of illusions, too, not just the magical ones. He's on the edge of collapse, Tybalt. When he falls, it's going to be hard."

Tybalt frowned softly. "Do you still want to follow him?"

"Of course." Honoria snorted. "If nothing else, I got a letter from my mother warning me not to do it. That's reason enough to do so."

"It might be more serious than that, Honoria." Tybalt caught and held her eye. "Can you really tie yourself to someone who might, as you say, collapse in the midst of battle, and whom you can't joke or cajole out of doing that?"

"Of course," Honoria repeated. "I *am* committed to this, Tybalt. I signed my name. And having a reputation for breaking my word would keep me out of all the best parties."

Tybalt sighed and put his head in his hands. "I never know whether you're being serious or not."

"I'm both at once." Honoria stood and kissed his cheek. "Now, I've really got to go. I'm practicing my Animagus

transformation.”

Tybalt laughed at her. Most of her friends did, when she said that. They thought the idea of Honoria becoming an Animagus, achieving a transformation that lasted longer than her whim dictated, was a marvelous piece of fun.

Honoria smiled as she stepped into the flames again. She thought it was fun to watch them laugh. It was so much fun that she had no intention of telling them that she'd actually mastered the transformation two years ago. She made quite a fine sea-mew, if she did say so herself.

“Go to your room, Edith.”

Edith ran away at once. She did not hesitate and question. Henrietta nodded as she made her way to the rune room. Edith knew what she had done wrong without prompting. She had shown hesitation and fear in front of Potter. She was mortified, as well she should be.

Henrietta arrived in the rune room, and shut its door carefully behind her. Her husband, Tertian Brown, would know better than to disturb her if he came home and found her here. With the door closed, the patterns drawn on the walls came together and formed one shimmering circle of power, which Henrietta could use to work some of her strongest magic.

She began with whips of light, calling them forth from her hands with nonverbal incantations and slicing through several feet of cloth, then of wood, then of stone, which the room provided when she asked for them. With each slice, her confidence returned, and the slight startlement she'd felt in Potter's presence slid away from her.

Oh, yes, the boy is powerful, she thought, as she began the Dark Arts curses that she always practiced to keep her hand in. They burst with far more force here than they would elsewhere, but Henrietta had hopes of at least doubling their strength outside the room. *But what good is power without the will to use it?*

She had sensed that weakness in Potter at once, with her usual talent for finding the one personality trait that would hamstring another witch or wizard. Potter was too soft-hearted. He had magic that made Henrietta's mouth water, but he believed too much in mercy, in kindness, in compassion, in leaving choices open to other people when he would do better to herd them along.

Even more devastating, at least for his own cause, he obviously expected the same mercy, kindness, compassion, and consideration from his allies.

Henrietta laughed aloud as she cast a curse that would have made part of the room's wall sway and buckle, if the runes hadn't held it up and filled in the stone between the patterns as fast as it disintegrated.

This was the kind of chance she'd been looking for for *years*. She would have done something about it earlier, but there hadn't been enough of a power vacuum in wizarding Britain for the last fourteen years. Albus Dumbledore had a lock on most wizards' devotion, and the Dark families were mostly scattered, bribing people in the Ministry for petty individual gains or clinging to their old alliances and pride and not looking beyond them.

Now came *this* tasty prize, an alliance organizing around someone who had only his magic to recommend him.

An abused child, a soft-hearted child, a child who knew nothing about the way the world worked.

Henrietta had only to gain control of him and of the alliance, and she would have the platform she needed to work her own will.

Exultant, excited, she spun and fired another curse at the far wall, then had to duck as it bounced back at her, reflected from a shield rune.

Oh, it would take some time, she knew that. She would need to understand his psychology better before she worked it so that it broke him. But he was close to shattering already, and the papers were full of clues to his past. Henrietta was confident that it wouldn't take her long to find something she could use.

She lifted her arms above her head and bowed, in homage to her own cleverness, then raised her head and smiled at her unseen prey.

Watch out, Potter. Henrietta Bulstrode is hunting you.

~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Six: Song of Battle

As the new allies began Flooing or Apparating home, Harry slipped gratefully out of the meeting room. No one seemed to notice his going—except Narcissa, but Adalrico was speaking to her, his voice quiet and urgent, and she couldn't get to Harry before he escaped. Harry realized the conversation was probably about him, but so long as he didn't have to hear it, then he was content.

He leaned against the wall outside the meeting room and shut his eyes. Fawkes crooned at him and groomed a bit of his hair, then paused and uttered a warble that Harry didn't figure out in time.

“Harry.”

“Mrs. Bulstrode,” said Harry, opening his eyes but keeping his gaze on the floor. He knew she was kneeling in front of him, and that her face would be full of concern, because *puellaris* witches were like that. He didn't have to look if he didn't want to, though. And he didn't want to. This was another time when he would just have to wait a few more minutes to relax. He would fight his way through the conversation with Elfrida, and then go upstairs and sleep. He was sure that he would do so deeply with Fawkes beside him.

“I wanted you to see Marian,” said Elfrida, voice gentle. “You haven't seen her since the night she was born.”

Harry felt a boneless relaxation drop into his shoulders. That was true, and if she had only come to talk about Marian, then he didn't have to fear any personal inquires he couldn't deflect. He reassured himself that he'd been silly to panic. After all, the truth he'd learned years ago still held good: most people were more interested in talking about themselves or what related to themselves than they were in talking about him. He leaned forward obediently, and Elfrida drew back a fold of the blanket that had covered Marian's face.

Harry had thought she would be asleep, since she had been quiet throughout the meeting, but Marian was awake, moving her fists in small, complicated patterns above her head, to which she was giving the whole of her attention. Her hair was coming in dark, and was plastered slightly to her head. Her eyes were still blue. Harry wondered if they would change color or not. He didn't know how long it was before that happened to babies.

“She's been very good for me so far,” Elfrida murmured, smiling down at her with an expression so warm and tender that Harry felt strengthened just being near it. “She almost never cries, and when she does, then I know that she really needs something from me. I think going through what she did when she was just a few minutes old changed something in her.” Elfrida lowered a hand and touched Marian's face with exquisite tenderness, then glanced back up at Harry. “I did say once that I wanted you near Marian while she was young, so that she could experience powerful magic and not be frightened of it. Do you think you could show her some of that now, Harry?”

Harry blinked. “Do you think she'll remember this later, Mrs. Bulstrode?”

Elfrida laughed softly. “No, Harry, but she would get used to it the same way that she gets used to warmth and learns to fear cold. It's not the specific memory that matters, but her growing accustomed to the sensation.”

Harry nodded doubtfully. He supposed Elfrida was right, but he hadn't ever studied caring for children. It hadn't been something he needed to learn, with Connor the same age as he was.

He knelt down beside Elfrida, and then she complicated things by handing Marian to him. Awkwardly, Harry adjusted his arms around the baby, afraid that her head would flop in one direction and her body in another. He could too easily imagine her neck snapping or her head smashing if he dropped her.

“There,” said Elfrida gently. “Just use one arm to support her head and one around her waist, and then—there. Good, Harry.” Harry couldn't help soaking in the praise in spite of himself, and it was true that Marian's warmth felt soft and delicious against his chest. “Now, release your magic a bit.”

Harry half-closed his eyes and let some of his barriers slip.

Rich magic flooded the hall, and lapped back on Harry and Marian. Marian made an inquiring little noise and waved her hands, but the noise wasn't distressed, so Harry went on pouring it. Marian's nose wrinkled up a moment later, and she sneezed.

Harry would have stopped, if Elfrida's laughter hadn't encouraged him. "She's a Bulstrode," she said. "And they smell powerful magic as thunderstorms. That's all. Go on, Harry." Her hand descended on his shoulder, as though to support him. Harry wondered why. The wall was doing a good job of holding him up.

He kept an eye on Marian's face as he went on exuding his magic, certain he should stop at any moment. But Marian only grew more and more alert and lively as the power rose around them. She giggled, and the movements of her hands seemed to become more coordinated. She laid her head on Harry's hand and blinked blue eyes up at him.

Elfrida rubbed gently at his shoulder, and then began to sing, so softly at first that Harry mistook the song for an audible manifestation of his magic. He kept his focus on Marian, at least until the actual words of the song claimed his attention.

The song was a mother's chant, the words of a witch watching over her child who would do anything to keep that child safe.

Harry calmed his instinctive flutter of panic by telling himself that she was singing for Marian, but that justification smashed when he turned his head and met her eyes. They were focused on him. Elfrida looked fiercer than he had ever seen her, and a glint of fang shone from her mouth. He remembered that *puellaris* witches transformed into lionesses when they defended their children.

Or children under their care.

She thinks of me as her child.

Harry stiffened, and then had to juggle Marian. He pulled his magic carefully back into his body. It was harder than he expected. He must have come closer to collapse than he thought. Elfrida watched him with a faint frown that grew more pronounced as he rebuilt his barriers.

"Harry, what is wrong?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, and was horrified to hear his voice becoming jagged. He might have collapsed with some of his new allies still in the Manor. He gently pressed Marian back into Elfrida's arms and turned his face to the side as he eased along the wall, ignoring Fawkes's scolding croons. "This is wonderful. You're wonderful. I just—I can't. Not right now."

"Harry—"

Harry did not quite run towards the stairs up to his room, but it was a near thing. Fawkes fluttered and clung until Harry hissed at him to go away. Then he closed his bedroom door behind him, locked it, and flung himself on the bed.

Relaxing was one thing. Sharing a tender moment with one of his allies was fine. Doing what he had promised was great. But he had felt himself peering over the rim of a collapse much greater than he had any room to make, down there.

I'm sorry, he whispered, uselessly, to people who couldn't hear him. I'm sorry. But I know that I didn't do a very good job of convincing my new allies, definite plans or not, and I need to keep up that mask of strength until I do. I'm sorry.

He pinched his nose until the tears in his eyes became the far less threatening tears of pain, and then went to bed. A gentle knock came at his door a few minutes after he did, but Harry ignored it, and after an understanding pause, Draco went away.

Harry dreamed.

This dream was unlike the others, though. In his visions, he had always been in a solid place, with walls or trees around him and the Dark Lord somewhere to the front or side. This time, he was drifting in a hazy mist, which only gradually parted and ebbed together to create images that made sense.

The strongest component of the dream was the mood, really. Harry could feel excitement around him like a living, breathing

current of air. He was sure it was Voldemort's excitement, and while it made him shiver to be so bathed in it, he began to wonder if the Dark Lord was dreaming, and had caught Harry up in that dream. If so, then he should wake up, because he didn't think there was anything to be learned from seeing Voldemort's nightly ambitions. Harry already knew that he feared death and hated Muggles and desired domination of the wizarding world.

The dream snapped suddenly into focus, though, and Harry found himself very nearly in a vision. He glanced around, and saw the back of a house in front of him, with the full moon riding overhead. It looked like a dream of tonight, but did Voldemort have prophetic dreams? Harry started to lash his tail in frustration, and then realized he was human, and not lynx, in this dream.

He crouched down and pulled out his wand as an instinctive gesture of comfort. The nature of their connection had indeed altered. He wasn't sure what had done it, though perhaps it was due to the resurrection. And he had no idea whether he might be in danger here.

He scurried to the side, and watched the moon ducking in and out of the racing clouds above. Then the light struck through them, and while Harry had never seen the house from this angle, he no longer had any trouble in recognizing it, particularly given the shimmer of isolation wards around it.

The Burrow.

He's thinking of going after Connor.

Voldemort's exultation surged around him, and Harry sensed the dream breaking up through no will of his own. Voldemort was probably waking with the thought of attacking his brother firmly in mind.

Harry jumped, frantically, his heart so busy in his throat it seemed ready to strangle him. He had to wake, and he had to get to the Burrow right away.

Harry sat bolt upright, gasping, and then winced as searing pain cut through his scar. At least it wasn't bleeding, he thought, as he rolled out of bed and landed heavily on the floor. And he had no need to get dressed, since he had fallen asleep hours ago wearing his clothes. He stretched one arm above his head, then the other, to relieve the aches that came from sleeping too long in the same position, and stood and headed for the door.

He opened it to find Draco there, and blinked at him for a moment before the dream bit him like a dragon. "Excuse me, Draco," he said, starting to edge past him.

Draco caught his left wrist just below the glamour, a usual gesture with him lately when he wanted to attract Harry's attention. "What's going on?" he asked, barely moving his lips. "I felt your panic all the way down the hall. And now you look as if you're going into danger again. What is it, Harry? You did promise me that you would tell me before you hurried off."

Harry wanted to scream. Unlike the visions, which happened simultaneously with his seeing them, he didn't know how long it would be before Voldemort landed at the Burrow. That only made him more determined to go, not less. But, on the other hand, Draco was physically stronger than he was right now, and Harry didn't want to hurt him with his magic.

He made up his mind. It wouldn't take long. "Voldemort was dreaming about attacking Connor," he whispered. "And now he's resolved on it, or it seemed like that before his dream broke up. So I have to go stop him."

"Of course you do," said Draco. "And the rest of us are going with you."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Mrs. Parkinson stayed here this evening," Draco went on. "So did the Bulstrodes—all but Adalrico's cousin, of course. It won't take long to get them out of bed, and Mum and Father with them. If you are going to battle, Harry, then you'll have plenty of allies to fight beside you. Come on." He drew Harry down the hall before he could think of an objection.

Harry managed to set his feet as he reached the stairs. "But this isn't their fight—"

"I really am sick and tired of you saying things like that," said Draco casually, without looking at him. "The Parkinsons and the

Bulstrodes are your formal family allies. And do you really think my parents would do less for you than they would?" He paused for a moment. "Well, maybe not Father, but what about Mum? She's risked her life for you many times, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "It's not that. But I haven't led a battle before. I don't know how to do it—"

"Bollocks," said Draco, ignoring the scandalized portrait they were passing at that moment. "Come on, Harry." He shoved Harry into the middle of the entrance hall, and paused to stare at him. "I'm going to get the others. Remember, Harry, one movement without me, and you'll find yourself under a Body-Bind or a sleeping potion. Just *one*." He turned and ran in the direction of doors Harry assumed led to the guest bedrooms.

Forced to wait, Harry closed his eyes and held a silent argument with himself. Would it really be better to stay here? He could still go into battle—

Like an idiot, yes, you could, said Regulus, with brutal force. You don't know if he's there yet, Harry.

But he could be! Harry wailed. And what if everyone else takes ages to get moving?

They were Death Eaters or fighters, Regulus said dryly. And Draco has plenty of experience hurrying after you by now. I doubt that they'll be long.

I can't risk their lives.

You're not. They are. That's the difference.

Harry was about to resume the debate when he heard claws tap on the floor in front of him. He blinked and looked up. A slender, pale werewolf he recognized as Hawthorn was trotting towards him, her slightly wrong muzzle and too-lengthy legs the main features that marked her out as different from an ordinary wolf. She came to a halt in front of him and fixed him with stern hazel eyes.

"Um," said Harry weakly. "Shouldn't you be out hunting?"

Hawthorn snarled at him, for a moment reminding him of the savage beast she would be without the Wolfsbane Potion. Then she extended her head and butted at him playfully. Harry wavered and nearly sat down, so weak was he. Hawthorn whined softly, turning her head to catch his eye again.

"I'm all right," Harry lied, looking away. "Just a bit of a shock, waking up the way I did."

"There she is."

Harry looked over his shoulder, and blinked. That *had* been fast. Draco was running back down the hall with Narcissa behind him in formal robes, obviously the first pair she'd snatched. Lucius was at his wife's shoulder, walking fast but not in an undignified manner. Elfrida and Adalrico were just flooding out of a room down the hall, holding their wands. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen an expression of such stony determination on anyone's face as Elfrida now wore.

Worried as he was, Harry started when he saw her coming to fight. "What about Millicent and Marian?" he demanded.

"Millicent is staying here," said Elfrida calmly, swinging her cloak out of the way of her wand. "She'll guard Marian for me, and the wards will do the rest. I trust her to protect her sister more than I trust her in battle."

Harry ground down his teeth and said nothing about that. "*Now* can we go?" he demanded.

Draco caught his arm firmly. "Where are we going?"

"Ottery St. Catchpole," Harry said. "The Burrow, the Weasleys' house. My brother is staying there, and Voldemort is going to attack it."

"Did Evan Rosier really send you a letter?" Adalrico demanded.

Harry sighed in agitation. "Does this really—"

“Yes, it does.” Adalrico dropped to a knee in front of him. “We are not about to risk our lives, Harry, or let you risk yours, without more proof than this.”

Harry swiped at his fringe, revealing his scar. “This gives me a connection to Voldemort,” he said, not having time to be amused as half his audience flinched at the name. Elfrida didn’t; he did note that. “I dream about what he’s dreaming, sometimes, and about his plans, and this time I dreamed about him getting eager and excited about the Burrow.”

Adalrico bowed his head and clenched his arm for a moment. “Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us, Harry.”

I wouldn’t have, but you made it impossible otherwise, Harry screamed in his mind, but kept his face calm. “Can we go?”

“Of course.”

They arranged themselves in a moment, with Lucius Side-Apparating Draco, Narcissa holding Harry’s wrist in a firm grip, and Adalrico and Elfrida standing on either side of Hawthorn.

Harry was desperately trying to calculate angles and how many Death Eaters were likely to be there as they vanished.

Harry and Narcissa landed on the slope behind the Burrow, in almost the same place from which Harry had seen the house in Voldemort’s dream. He heard more distant *cracks*, and suspected the others were in slightly different places. He tugged, trying to get away from Narcissa and join them. There was no telling when the Death Eaters would arrive, or how many they would be when they finally did. That was one reason to prefer the visions: they gave him more exact information.

“Harry.”

Harry paused and glanced reluctantly at Narcissa. From the tone she gave his name, this wasn’t the first time she’d said it.

“You are not to risk your life unnecessarily,” Narcissa whispered in his ear. “Do you understand me? I know that risk-taking is an inherent part of battle, but if I see you try to get in the way of a curse that you can’t block, or worry more about defending someone else’s life than your own, there will be *consequences*.”

He had to shrink under the glare she gave him. It seemed that she was actually angry at him, the same way Draco was. Harry supposed he had treated them very thoughtlessly. He lowered his eyes and nodded.

“Good.” Narcissa released him. “The others landed in front of the house. We should try to meet up with them.”

Harry had just begun to move when he heard other sharp *cracks* begin. He tensed at once, and counted them. When they reached ten he snarled in silence and began to pace forward, his mind buzzing with battle spells.

Then an eleventh sounded, coming in behind them.

Harry spun, and the Blasting Curse on his lips just barely missed the dark figure who stood there, lifting his hands in mock surrender. In the light of the moon, Harry could make out Evan Rosier’s face.

“Hello, Harry,” he whispered. “Don’t be so hasty. I’ve come to help you, and to tell you to be careful. My lord has no imagination. He thinks that someone who went after you once and failed should be allowed another chance. Fenrir Greyback is here.” He paused dramatically. “But that is not the worst of it.”

Narcissa had her wand trained steadily on Rosier, Harry saw. He ignored that. Right now, since Rosier was actually acting sane, Harry would treat his warnings as if they made sense. “What is the worst of it, then?”

He knew, even as another *crack* sounded, and his scar flooded with pain.

“My lord is here,” Rosier finished softly, and then drew his wand and winked. “Should we go show him that he can’t have things just the way he likes any more?”

He hurtled downhill. Harry felt Narcissa try to grab hold of him. But he had heard her warning, and he would heed it, and anyway, he was the only one on the battlefield with any chance of handling Voldemort. He slipped her grasp and followed Rosier, his magic lifting his feet just above the grass as he went.

He could feel Voldemort's magic, like a fanged, clawed beast just awakened, turning to face and find his. Harry let more of his own pour through his skin, this time rising around him in the old familiar shape of wings. This was not the gentle demonstration he had put on for Marian, but one far more battle-ready.

He came around the side of the house, and took in the beginning battle at a glance. He could make out Lucius's pale hair flying as he dueled two smaller Death Eaters, and two tumbling shapes that must be Hawthorn and Greyback, and Adalrico and Elfrida back-to-back in a ring of enemies, and Draco firing spells back at a heavysset Death Eater, probably Karkaroff, with a coolness that surprised Harry—

And in the center of it all, taking down the isolation wards around the Burrow, was Voldemort.

Harry made straight for him. He heard whooping behind him, and snarling, and yelping, and yelling, and the snap of spells, but he forced that all from his mind. He let the pain in his scar act as guide and beacon, rather than a distraction. Voldemort turned to face him with one upraised eyebrow, and his lipless mouth erupted into a low, hissing laugh.

Harry felt the grass stir to the side, but he didn't have time to evade the rush of the queen basilisk, which wrapped around his body and bore him to a rolling halt. Harry sucked in a desperate breath as he felt her try to crush his ribs, and heard both her and Voldemort laughing in Parseltongue.

A moment later, light flared overhead and Fawkes sang a battle-song, and the basilisk screamed. Harry suspected the phoenix was making for her eyes.

Harry Apparated, leaping from the basilisk's grasp into freedom not far from Voldemort. The stare of his red eyes was not much better than the stare from a basilisk, but at least it wouldn't kill him all by itself.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort, and the pain in Harry's scar cracked down like lightning strikes. "Come to surrender, at last, to your rightful master?"

"You wish," Harry whispered. His magic still rose around him like wings, and he felt the hatred rising with it, wrapping around his neck like a vine. *This* was the enemy he had trained to fight, and other people's attempts to direct his attention to other targets, his parents or Dumbledore, were only distractions. He had never fought wandless magic with wandless magic, other than by trying to drain his opponent's power, but he was beginning to think it was the only way he would meet Voldemort equally. Fighting a Dark Lord was not like fighting other wizards.

Voldemort laughed at him, as if he knew the way Harry's thoughts were tending, and the magic around him leaped eagerly forward.

Harry had no idea what way Voldemort imagined his power. He didn't have to know, he found. The pain that pierced him as that magic collided with his own was the pain of fang and claw, and he might as well imagine something that could fight back against that.

He chose the manifestation of a dragon, and actually saw the gleam of the dark wings for a moment as they wrapped around Voldemort's attacking power. That power shredded his own, of course, but that was all right; his dragon only had another layer of scales under that one. The dragon crowded close and clung with four legs, and Harry moved one hand in a clenching motion, imagining it whipping its head forward and crushing the throat of Voldemort's dragon. Harry heard a gasping breath from Voldemort, and rejoiced in the knowledge that he'd hurt the bastard.

Then Voldemort began to fight back.

Harry felt his magic expand outward, pushing, shoving him back, exploding the dragon that Harry tried to contain it with. Harry gathered in his magic as it swirled about, ignored the pain in his limbs, and stared at the earth behind Voldemort, not bothering to think of incantations this time.

Explode, he willed. *Explode*.

The earth leaped up in a fountain of grass and dirt, and Voldemort was knocked forward by the blast, all his attention too forcefully on Harry for him to concentrate on keeping his balance. Harry took as quick an advantage as he could, this time willing Voldemort's windpipe to crumple, his throat to crush.

Voldemort resisted, his dead-white skin achieving the hardness of iron, and then threw Harry off. He retreated a few steps from the Burrow, circling, pleased to note that he was drawing Voldemort with him.

Then they fell into the duel, and Harry discovered a level of battle he hadn't known existed. When two wizards were this powerful, not needing spells to contain their magic, what mattered was will, imagination, and foresight. It reminded Harry of those ancient contests of shapeshifters he'd heard of, with one becoming a sparrow and the other a hawk, one a stone and the other a beast with teeth that could crush a stone, one a mouse and another a cat. He had to try and anticipate what Voldemort was doing and counteract it, at the same moment as he had to imagine strategies that Voldemort himself would not be able to overcome.

And all on the fly.

Harry called wind that Voldemort swallowed that became a blast of force that Harry absorbed that became another tearing of earth that Voldemort resisted that flooded forth as a strike at his heart that Harry dodged that melted into a massive slap that Voldemort bore with and counteracted with an attempt to rip his ribs through his chest that Harry turned and batted home with enough strength to make Voldemort bend over and wheeze as his lungs labored that melded with breathing a cloud of poisonous gas into Harry's face that became—

At some point, Harry fell so thoroughly into the battle that he lost track of the other fighters, didn't think about drawing Voldemort away from the Burrow, and no longer knew anything except the fierce gladness that came from making another strike and turning yet another.

Draco dropped to one knee to dodge a severing curse, and then fired a tripping jinx at the Death Eater opposite him. The Death Eater fell over, and Draco scrambled up, shaking, mopping the sweat from his forehead and trying desperately to see where Harry was.

He whipped around just in time to see his father level his wand at one of the robed, masked figures and say, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Draco watched in detached wonder as the bolt of green light took another life from the world, cleanly and simply and quickly. One moment the Death Eater was alive, the next he was dead. Lucius was already turning to find another victim, his face unmarred by emotion. Draco swallowed, and wondered if he had been ready to see that. One thing he was rapidly learning about himself, another point of difference from Harry, was that he would never go willingly into battle, or really be excited by it.

He backed up a step, and noticed a Death Eater with blonde hair flowing from behind her mask creeping towards his father's back.

Draco shouted, but Lucius was engaged in a crackling spell duel with his next intended victim, flipping from one incantation to the next, and didn't notice.

Draco ran. He didn't know what he could really do—his shout hadn't distracted the Death Eater, either, and his shock seemed to have wiped his mind clean of all useful spells—but he was determined to do *something*.

He fixed his eyes on the Death Eater and found himself pushing, reaching, in desperation, trying to use his strangely changed empathy to predict what she would do next.

There came a tearing, ripping sensation, and Draco briefly thought someone had hit him with a curse that managed to spill his intestines. Then he realized his perception was bouncing, as though his head had detached from his shoulders. His vision filled with hurtling dirt and grass, and he gasped, thinking he would have a mouthful of it any moment now.

Then he was inside the Death Eater's head.

Draco reeled, dizzy from the onslaught of so many different sensations: a taller body, breasts against his chest, a changed center of gravity, strange circulation of blood, an unfamiliar wand gripped in an unfamiliar hand, long hair flying around him, the

sudden press of a cloth mask against his face and the restricted field of vision that meant. He had just enough presence of mind to try and steady himself, and he found the body obeying, stopping in its rush and shaking its head.

Draco didn't know how he was getting the Death Eater to do what he wanted, and he didn't really care. At the moment, he wanted to figure out some way out of this person and back to his own body.

And, of course, you want to stop her from attacking your father, Draco thought, and could have smacked himself.

He squeezed certain muscles, and her hand responded, coming up and pointing her wand directly at her own temple. Draco spoke the proper incantation for a Stunning Spell, whispered it through her brain, and heard her lips intone it. Then she dropped senseless as the spell struck home.

Draco found himself bouncing through darkness, but then he opened intimately familiar eyes, and felt his stomach heave in an intimately familiar way. He just managed to make sure he didn't vomit on himself.

So that's what my gift is, he thought dizzily, wiping at his mouth. *I can possess people. How bloody useful is that?*

Well, it could be very bloody useful, he answered himself, if he didn't kneel here on the battlefield and stare at nothing.

He lurched to his feet, staring around for more people to possess.

Snarl, and snap, and grip, and dodge, and nothing was going as it should have been, the impertinent brat, the impudent boy, the inopportune *brat*.

He knew the boy was making him think in confused circles—he, Lord Voldemort!—and that enraged him further. He kept trying to break away from the contest he was engaged in, and still Harry Potter wouldn't let him. His magic, Lord Voldemort's stolen magic, boiled and surged around him, and even though he should have seen long since that he was the weaker of the two, he kept right on pressing forward, as if he were a Gryffindor and not a Slytherin, as if he had the *right* to challenge Lord Voldemort for this kind of power!

It would have been enough to drive a greater man mad, if there were any greater men.

But Lord Voldemort knew his opponent's mind, and he knew what was most precious to him, who out of the people on the battlefield he would die to protect. And he knew what Potter would assume when he saw Lord Voldemort point his wand at that person.

Yes, there he was, staggering up from his knees, staring around the battlefield, far from the other struggling Death Eaters at the moment and not paying any attention to the great Lord across the battlefield from him.

Perfect.

Harry had been aware for some time that the pace of his and Voldemort's interchange was slowing, but he thought that was due to his own weakness. He could think of no reason that Voldemort would want to back away from this contest. He didn't, himself. He wanted to continue until one of them was dead, and he didn't think that it would matter so very much if it was him. The magic flooded him, intoxicating, coaxing, pulling effort after effort from him.

Nothing else mattered, not food or drink or his brother or anything but defeating the Dark Lord.

Then Voldemort spun to the side, and Harry staggered, trying to recover his balance. He saw that Voldemort was not staring at him anymore. He looked up, wondering if someone else had arrived, and feeling a bit jealous that anyone else could draw the Dark Lord's attention even for a moment.

He saw Draco, climbing to his feet with eyes wide with wonder, and he saw Voldemort's wand lift and point, and yes, something *did* matter more than defeating the Dark Lord, and he sprang forward with a scream of rage and fury and love, shaping all his magic into an offensive strike, determined to take down Voldemort or at least force him to retreat before his curse could hit Draco

—

Then he realized, as Voldemort turned to face him, and Harry was all open, all defenseless, that it had been a trap, that Voldemort had used his sacrificial instincts against him.

He had no time to retreat, no time to shield. He pushed and flung his offensive magic ahead, even as Voldemort said, “*Cogo!*”

It was the Compression Curse, a simple spell that Harry ordinarily would have had no trouble deflecting. He couldn’t now, though. He’d left himself too open, put every impulse of his heart into the strike, and as his body began to be crushed together, his shoulders bending and breaking, he knew that he was going to die, squeezed into a ball just like every other victim of the curse.

He couldn’t fight it, even as the extent of his stupidity flashed on him with the vividness of a storm, so he pressed ahead with his offensive strike. It was the only thing that remained to him now.

He saw the strike go home. Voldemort had prepared himself to shield against something else, Harry saw, some complicated attempt to turn him inside out or achieve another equally showy effect.

He hadn’t prepared himself for pain, and especially not for emotional pain, for Harry’s transfer of everything he was feeling right now directly into Voldemort’s mind.

Harry felt his back bow at an impossible angle, but he got to see Voldemort squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head. He knew his arms were curling into his chest, like the legs of a dying insect, but meanwhile Voldemort was shaking with accumulated pain and rage and fear and grief. Bones shattered throughout his body like explosions, but Voldemort was feeling explosions of his own, his mind struggling against the crushing onslaught of emotion and finding no escape.

He wailed aloud.

Then he Disappeared.

His magic went with him, and the Compression Curse eased. Harry slumped to the ground, his voice a mixture of groan and pant and scream. He heard the Death Eaters vanishing as well, and spared a moment to wonder if Evan Rosier was among them, or if he had fallen by the wand of one of his old comrades or Harry’s allies.

But most of his mind, oddly, was utterly clear—probably because he had pushed so much emotion at Voldemort—and taken up with the idea that the ending of the Compression Curse was good fortune that he did not deserve. He had done nothing to win this battle, and had done something that might well have lost it for his allies.

He had rushed in without looking. He had acted as a sacrifice again, and this time it could have been the end of him, and the end of the means of defeating Voldemort as well, unless the prophecy chose Connor and one other person.

He had been a fool, and the cracks running all through him had broken wide open at the worst possible time. The mere revelation of what he was feeling had been enough to drive Voldemort away.

He stared along the ruin of his life, and felt iron determination rise in him, as if he had a new, steel skeleton behind his shattered shoulder blades and hips. Those bones hurt less than the revelation of his idiocy.

“*Integritas!*”

Harry gasped aloud, then screamed, as the Whole Healing spell, a dangerous incantation about two steps away from Dark Arts, ran over him in a flash of white heat. He could feel the damn thing pulling his shattered bones into place, shoving and tugging at his shoulders until they unbowed, drawing ruthlessly on his magic to put things back together and make them as they should be. It only worked on bodily health, of course, so the mental shards lay just where they had fallen, but after a few moments of incandescent pain that rivaled the agony when he had lost his hand, Harry was physically healed.

He rolled slowly over, and stared up at a grinning Evan Rosier.

“I couldn’t let you die,” he said. “You make life too interesting. But I couldn’t heal you nicely, either. I do have a reputation to maintain, you know.”

He vanished.

Harry closed his eyes. He could hear running footsteps, and knew his allies would be there in a few moments. He knew that he could cuddle into their arms, and accept what they had to offer. They would be more than he deserved, too.

And that means that you cannot go to them yet, said the voice of the new revelation rising in his mind.

He had acted like a fool. He must not act like that anymore.

On the other hand, if he went back with his allies now, and especially to Draco, Harry knew it would not be enough. Finally, finally, he was seeing and predicting his own reactions as thoroughly as he had seen and predicted theirs, and he knew that he wouldn't let himself collapse completely. His pride would interfere again, and his desire not to be seen as weak, and he wouldn't fall far enough.

It had to be a complete fall, and a complete rebuilding.

And he would have to do it himself. Other people had spent enough time healing him: Draco, Narcissa, Fawkes, Regulus, the unicorns, the Maze. He would do this alone. He thought now, as the iron skeleton of resolve grew throughout him, that he could do it, so long as there was no one around to see his tears and wrap him in warm arms and make him feel as if he had to defend himself and stop anyone from seeing the extent of the damage.

He was, he thought, at last ready to face himself, in the company of himself.

And for that he needed a private place, and he knew the perfect one.

You can't go there, Harry! Regulus was screaming in his head. You can't! It's too dangerous! I know that you don't do anything by halves, but this is too much!

Regulus, Harry said gently, I love you very dearly, and you've often been right, but this time, you're wrong. Go away.

He firmed his Occlumency shields and pushed Regulus out of his mind. Then he curled up on himself, savoring the remnants of pain.

He was going to face his demons, wasn't he? Then he might as well go to the place where most of them dwelt, and, indeed, not do anything by halves. He would drag himself through an interrogation as ruthless as that he would have put a captured Death Eater through.

He vanished even as he felt someone drop to his knees beside him, Apparating to a place where none of them could have followed, thanks to the isolation wards, even if they knew where it was.

Home.

Godric's Hollow.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seven: Breakdown

Harry opened his eyes to find himself lying on grass that had once been intimately familiar to him, with the radiant full moon shining down in broken shards from overhead where its light passed through the isolation wards. He let out a sharp little breath. He had wondered if the wards would be intact, but he had imagined they would be. Lily had lived here by herself for more than a year, with only Dumbledore's house elves to tend her. Dumbledore would have wanted to be sure that she was well-protected, and the isolation wards that had stood around the house for fourteen years were stronger than anything he could have woven in just a few months.

Harry pulled himself slowly to his feet, blinking and staggering as his newly-healed bones protested, and then reached out and touched the holes in the wards. There were a few, mostly only large enough for owls. He repaired them, and then raised a thick ward of his own, twining together Shield Charms until a chain of *Protego* ran along behind the isolation wards, forming a dome,

as they did.

He paused to study his work when he was done, and then nodded, once. The wards around the house were keyed to James, to Connor, to Remus, to Lily, to Dumbledore, and perhaps also to Peter, though Harry was fairly sure his father had changed that after Peter's intrusion in the summer before their third year at Hogwarts. That meant that they might be able to follow him here, particularly if Regulus managed to pass information through one of the former Death Eaters to Connor—

But even if they followed him here, they couldn't get in. The Shield Charms were keyed only to him, and would hold firm.

Harry turned towards the house, lying innocently in the moonlight, only to pause as he felt a tug of warmth in his mind. He shook his head in irritation, and raised his Occlumency walls even higher than he had before. Fawkes was trying to reach him. If Harry sealed the bond off like a tunnel, however, then the phoenix couldn't find him, and couldn't appear at his side. He had been in Godric's Hollow before, of course, but that had been with only the weaker wards in place and Harry welcoming him. Harry was fairly confident he could keep Fawkes out even as he would keep out Regulus.

This was something he had to do alone.

He reached the door of the house and opened it. It swung easily under his hand, not needing even an unlocking charm. Of course, Harry thought, Lily hadn't had the need to fear anyone intruding while the isolation wards stood, and she had expected to return with him this summer. No need to lock it all up tight when she believed that she'd come back with him from Hogwarts just a few minutes after leaving.

And now she's gone.

But not forever, Harry told himself, and that was the reason he was here at all. He stepped into the entrance room and flicked his hand. The lamps in the room lit with a blast of brilliance, sending light flooding across books and furniture and carpeting he hadn't seen in a year and a half.

Harry bit his lip as he studied them. He wondered if the best place to do what he intended would really be here. The room held memories, of course, but he didn't think it was enough. His training had taken place here, but also all around the house, and the most traumatic single event he could remember occurring here was Remus's finding out he had been abused.

His fingers flexed spasmodically as he thought about that.

You can say the word. You can think it.

It didn't help that he didn't really believe it yet, of course.

Never mind. That would cease to matter in a moment.

Harry shook his head and moved on into the kitchen. It was dusty from several days of neglect; the house elves must have left to go back to Hogwarts when they realized there was no longer any human here to care for. Harry could feel his breath rushing faster and faster, his spine stiffening, his hand clenching at his side. He didn't realize it was clenched until he tried to extend it to touch the table and found his fingers resisted moving, however.

This was the place where he had seen his mother for what he believed would be the last time, the day she had tried to renew the phoenix web on him.

This will do.

Harry forced his hand to open, and then seated himself on the floor, a careful distance from both table and cupboards. He didn't want to ram his head into anything, in case he made uncontrolled physical movements. He didn't want to fall, either. He half-closed his eyes and breathed for long moments in silence.

Carefully, he stripped away his consciousness of anything outside Godric's Hollow. The emotions he felt about his allies and Draco, Snape and Scrimgeour, his parents and Dumbledore, slid into Occlumency pools and left him alone. He could feel only his breathing, and the slinking of the truths beneath the surface of his mind.

Harry thought of the way he knew his own mind looked: a living thing, half-forest and half-tame, rustling with green leaves.

Throughout it lay the Occlumency pools, and under them lay the bridges of his magic that he had established at the end of his second year, when he was trying furiously to contain it. A neat structure, he thought, and undergirded by training he hadn't ever tried to change. Training that ran deeper than the phoenix web, training that had made him into the person he was but the quality of which he hadn't paused to consider.

How could he have considered it, though? He had been told, when he received it, that it was infallibly right and good.

Well, now he knew better. And now, he could summon the cool, sleek resolve that had arisen in him when he pushed his emotions into Voldemort's mind, and had seen himself lying helpless on the ground.

He had sometimes been merciless to his enemies in the past, and certainly with people he had thought behaved stupidly.

He could be merciless with himself.

Couldn't he?

Yes. I can do that.

Harry took one final deep breath. Even the means to keep himself focused and concentrated on the task at hand would end up as the means of delaying it if he let them become so. He made himself promise that, when he let out this breath, he would begin the change, and then he let it out.

And he turned his own magic on his own mind.

He imagined his Legilimency as a dragon, withering, blasting flame-breath taking out the forest, crisping and drying the leaves, collapsing the half-woven hedges, tearing into the substance of his thoughts. He heard silent screaming, and knew it came from him, that it might even be emerging from his throat as audible sound. He pushed forward, even when his head began to burn with dull pain, willing himself to ignore it. He dug down and down, setting the heart of his memories and sanity carefully in the Occlumency pools, but burning everything else.

He imagined the leaves parting, revealing the old instincts and training at the bottom of them. He saw webs and bridges and wounds, old scarred things that had been made by carelessness or design and then allowed to recover as they would. He tore them open, and more pain raged around the inside of his head. Harry dove deeper, dragging his resolve along with him.

Pain.

Memories soared past him, images of himself as a child, of his parents, of Connor, of Draco, of Voldemort. One moment he was in the graveyard, the next facing Lucius Malfoy in his study, the next a child casting pain curses on himself so that he could learn to resist torture. He accepted the wild chaos and dug deeper, ravaging the things that made him who he was. Everything most essential, the things he absolutely had to have to recover, was stored in the Occlumency pools. Everything else could be destroyed.

Somewhere along the way, he lost the consciousness of his name, though he knew he could recover it if necessary. That was in the Occlumency pools, too, or in the memories that stormed around him. He would only have to wait, and one of them would fly to him and stick itself to his face and tell him what he needed to know.

He landed at last near the bottom. His head pounded with pain. He knew that he had torn most of the webs that had confined him, though at the moment it was hard to remember why he had wanted to tear them. He lay back, panting, and then reached out and cracked open the first Occlumency pool, not trying to choose one in particular—he no longer remembered which was which—and waited to see what would emerge.

What emerged was an image of his brother. Connor, that was his name, and they were examining fairies at the bottom of the garden. After a short struggle, he remembered that their home was called Godric's Hollow. He didn't know his own name, not yet. That was not part of the scene. It was only a small thing beside the overwhelming consciousness of his brother. He smiled, and listened to Connor make up stories about the fairies, and studied the web of love that bound them.

That was part of what made him who he was, then.

And he had made mistakes because of it, savage mistakes. He had thought, for example, that nothing mattered more than Connor,

or rather that Connor mattered more than everyone else. And that was a mistake because, if everyone really did deserve the same chances, then Connor deserved the chances that other people had—but not *more*. The people who had taught him to love Connor, whom he didn't know, yet, had twisted that, and taught him that Connor did deserve more.

Why?

He blinked. He found it odd, but freeing, that he did not know why. It had something to do with the heart-shaped scar on his brother's forehead, though. He leaned forward, and peered at that attentively. The remembered him smiled. But there was nothing about the scar that particularly drew the attention, he thought. Hm. Perhaps he should reach into the Occlumency pools, again.

He did, and stamped down on the messy emotions that wanted to emerge. There would be time for them later.

Ah. The scar came from surviving a curse and killing a monster—but his brother had been only a baby when that happened. And Connor had not been the one who had survived the curse and killed the monster. That had been the remembered him. Himself, he supposed. He thought that was where the lightning bolt scar on his forehead had come from. But no one particularly revered him for that, and why should they? He had not been the one who had chosen to face the monster.

More rummaging. More peering into the Occlumency pool.

Oh. *Oh*. Other people had made the decision for him. His parents, of course, and another older man whose name he didn't wish to remember yet. Well, that made more sense. Parents should make the decisions for their children. And if they knew that one of their children could kill the monster, then—

They hadn't known.

He paused as that realization struck him, and considered it a moment. Then he pulled up a memory, seen as from a distance, of the night the monster had come to Godric's Hollow, and what had happened. He watched it in silence, as if seeing it for the first time, conscious that he wasn't, but allowing new emotions to flood across his mind.

They had just left him and his brother to face the monster alone. They had not known that one of them could defeat him, not for certain. They had only hoped.

That—that is hideous.

He was aware, distantly, that his indignation was more general than specific. He would have been upset about any parents who left their children to a monster without absolute trust in the defenses that guarded them. He had a sense, dimly, that it had been harder for him to be upset about *himself* being the baby in the cradle who had lain helpless as the monster swooped down.

Not so helpless.

But that had been an accident, a chance, a coincidence. It might have been predicted, but no one had known which way it was going to happen. He might easily have died, and the monster might have been destroyed by his brother. Or maybe something else would have happened that resulted in Connor dying. So the excuse of the good outcome couldn't be used to justify their leaving Connor and him alone. They had not *known*, their parents and this man named Albus Dumbledore.

He seized that insight and examined it for a moment. He had the feeling that it was important, though he did not know how. He cracked open yet another Occlumency pool, and waited to see what would emerge.

A torrent of emotions answered him, and as they flowed out, the memories they belonged to came and attacked him. Harry, Harry, that was his name, and he was fighting, gasping, struggling to stay on his feet and keep his balance in the midst of the current, remembering the resolve that had driven him here, knowing again who he was and what his training had been—

But he had hold of the insight, too, and it did not slip away. He slammed the insight into the memories flooding past him, and then he *understood*.

He had said once that his training didn't matter, because he had survived it. So it did not matter that some evil things had been done to him in the name of love, in the name of a twisted greater good, that he was a sacrifice. He had survived, and he accomplished many good things with the end result of that training. Why were Snape and the others so upset about it?

Well. Now he knew.

Harry could feel himself flinching from that insight, trying to fight it, marshalling all the old arguments. He raised steel cages of pure will and magic, cages that kept him from running. Wherever he turned, he saw only himself, reflected, and came to know and understand his part, because he had no choice.

They were upset for the same reason that he was upset about leaving children alone and helpless before a danger. Parents owed more care to their children than that. It did not matter that he was Harry, or that there was a prophecy involved, or that he had been taught to be a sacrifice. Other people still saw him as a child whose parents had not taken care of him. They saw him as a victim—

He really did revolt then, trying to knock himself unconscious rather than endure what was coming, but that merciless resolve gripped him and dragged him back. By Merlin, he would live through this. They were words, true words, and he would hear them.

He pulled himself through shattered glass, and he spoke them.

“They see me as a victim of child abuse because, to them, child abuse is a child’s parents treating him with something other than proper love and care. And that’s what my parents did.”

Harry opened his eyes, and became aware that he was breathing harshly all the while. Blood ran from his lips when he licked them; he had bitten almost straight through the lower one. He could not care. Revelation rang in his head like a crystal bell, and overrode the dull pain from his destroyed mind.

So that is what they see. That is what they know, or think they know. It is no wonder that they think me a victim. They would see any child in that situation as a victim. It is not that I’m me, particularly, that makes them think I can’t bear this. They would think the same thing of Connor if he had been trained to be a sacrifice for me. They would think the same thing of Draco. They would think the same thing of Millicent.

Wonder and relief flooded his heart. So it really was simple. It really was understandable. It really made sense, when he was able to consider himself the same as everyone else, or at least as other children in the same situation, and not as unique.

Knowing that the world had not gone mad, that he could share everyone else’s perspective if he really tried, was a great comfort.

Harry cocked his head. “So what would I expect Connor, or Draco, or Millicent, to feel, in the same situation?” he whispered.

Anger. Regret. Fear. Terror. They certainly wouldn’t want to testify to save Lily’s freedom, or to exonerate Dumbledore.

That is what everyone else is expecting me to feel.

Well, no wonder they’re so upset when I don’t appear to feel it!

Harry hooked his hand behind his head and lay back, staring at the ceiling. He could feel memories of the phoenix web and Lily pressing on him, if he really cared to look for them, but at the moment he was occupied in considering something else.

And why don’t I appear to feel it?

Harry frowned, half-closing his eyes. He supposed that this was where his answer would differ from other people’s, again. They would say it was his training. Any child *should* be as outraged and fearful as they were imagining.

But all those expected emotions only made part of his response. He did, still, feel the pity and the forgiveness that had made him shrink from the thought of charging even Dumbledore, the one he cared for least among the three, with child abuse. Their lives would be *ruined*.

“They’ve ruined my life,” he murmured, then paused. The words felt false. He understood, now, why other people would expect him to believe them. He could adopt that perspective by flicking his mind slightly to the side. Of course they had ruined his life by driving him into pain and uneasiness, by making him flinch with guilt whenever he wasn’t doing something to serve Connor, by putting the phoenix web on him.

But a softer voice answered back to that: *So what?*

Harry examined the voice thoughtfully. Could he be sure that it was his, and not the voice of the training they had put him through, the voice—*say it, Harry, they are only words, and words are easy*—of an abused child?

Well. That was a stupid thought to have, really. If he *was* an abused child, then the voice of an abused child would be his own voice. So he couldn't say that it wasn't him talking.

The way he thought of it, he realized, lying back in the kitchen where he'd spent years learning his lessons and taken his mother's magic away, was that the ruin of his life was a thing to be comforted and dug up and healed until it was really healed, not just paved over. But ruining other people's lives was not going to heal him, any more than killing Voldemort would bring Sirius back to life. What killing Voldemort accomplished was killing Voldemort, nothing more or less. Oh, of course, the long-term consequences of that act would be a bit different, but they still wouldn't include Sirius coming back to life—or Sylarana, for that matter—or turning back time so that neither he nor Connor would ever bear their scars. What would happen was the protection of the future, so that Voldemort could not go on killing. Harry would protect the people still alive. He could do nothing for the dead. And it seemed a bit blind of Snape to believe that he could really make it as if Harry's childhood had never been.

Harry abruptly blinked and stared.

What if he doesn't think of it that way? What if he thinks of it the other way? What if he filed charges against my parents and Dumbledore not to change the past, but to change the future, and protect me from their ever doing me harm again?

If he did...if he did...

Then I am an idiot.

Harry blew out a breath, and blinked away angry tears for a moment. Then he changed his mind and let them come. There was no one here to see him. There was no one who could get through his wards. He could weep, and no one would scold him or pity him or be frightened when he could not stop crying.

And he could not stop crying.

He turned on his side and let the tears fall until his eyes were swollen and his breath came in hiccupping sobs, drawn as though there were a thick, musty blanket in his lungs. He reveled in the peace and the certainty that followed the weeping. He didn't have anything to prove to anybody. He didn't have to keep up a brave face, or cry just the way other people would expect him to.

And he didn't have to pretend that he wasn't angry at Snape. He *was* still angry. Understanding why Snape had done it wasn't the same thing as agreeing with him.

How dare he? How could he? Why didn't he come to me and explain it like this? I know that he thought I was unreasonable, but then, he had the greater duty as the reasonable one to try to persuade me, instead of just letting these darts fly.

And, anyway, it doesn't matter if he was reasonable or not, I still have the right to be angry at him if I like.

The table exploded. Harry could feel his magic boiling around him, and took several deep, gasping breaths, trying to force it back under control.

Then he wondered, *Why? It's not as though there's anyone here to get frightened or hurt. I can let it explode if I like.*

He shook his head, and released his magic around him, much like the storm of his memories, pouring it fully and freely out for the first time. It stretched luxuriously, as deep as Voldemort's if not as strong, and surged. Harry smelled the scent of roses, and saw random flashes of light, and heard voices laughing and singing as the room appeared to tilt sideways. He was living in a disordered world that would have frightened anyone else.

It did not frighten him.

I don't need to be anything like what other people will expect me to be. I don't need to. I can understand them, and I can heal myself, but that doesn't mean that I need to be their perfect little portrait of the abused child, either. Why should I be? If this really is my life and my magic, my mind and my memories, and if I really do have the right to be a little selfish, the way that Draco said I could, then why should I have to react exactly the way they expect me to?

He did not have to, and in the same way he hurled his magic around his head in a loop and then let go of the tail by which he'd held it, smashing a hole open in the wall, he let go of the notion that he was ever going to be exactly what Snape wanted him to be, or Draco, or anyone else. Not everything he was needed to be healed. He was more than his wounds. He had to be, or he would rebuild himself in another image imposed on him from the outside. That this time it would be in the image of people who loved him, rather than people who feared him and wanted to control his magic, did not matter. It would still be someone else's picture of what he looked like.

He was more than that. He had been more than Lily's training, Dumbledore's warrior, James's neglected child. He was more than Snape's ward or Draco's love or Narcissa's adopted son, however much those roles might also be a part of him.

Harry stepped through the hole, his magic sliding around him, and looked up at the sky. The isolation wards, and his own Shield Charms, perceptibly dimmed the light of the full moon, but did not cause the same wavering effect on the stars, perhaps because the stars were too high and distant. Harry held out his hand, and, by a simple effort of will, enabled himself to see the starlight coiling in his palm.

Then he closed his fist, and turned some of his magic into thick black fog, and let it rise around him, and shut out the sight of even the house, and the grass, and the pond, and the moon. He was alone in the darkness, with the memory of the stars and the wind to sustain him, and another harsh truth.

Harry turned and faced it. His magic solidified into a mirror before him, a mirror that held no more than his own face. Of course, that was remarkable enough, since there was no light here to see the reflection by. So be it. He saw it anyway.

He quietly examined himself. Lightning bolt scar, missing hand—he had let the glamour fall away—bare arm where once Sylarana had clung. The other scars were not as visible, but present: Dragonsbane's death, Sirius's, the cracks that had parted him first from the rest of the world and then from his family, the mental damage Voldemort had inflicted on him, the hole where the phoenix web had been, the lack of knowledge about affection and social bonds that was instinctive to most other wizards he'd met, a wildness and raging temper, the broken barriers that had released his magic on the night Voldemort had come hunting, the dark stain caused by Rodolphus's murder and Mulciber's.

All marks of sacrifice. All places where he'd given something up or had something torn away. Even knowing that Dragonsbane had gone to his death willingly, that Sirius had committed suicide to keep Voldemort from using him against two boys he loved, that Sylarana had struck at Slytherin's basilisk in protective fury, that Rodolphus and Mulciber would have killed him if he hadn't killed them, could not change the fact of their deaths. Vengeance would never bring the dead back to life. Harry would never forget that.

There would be more casualties. The war had begun. He hadn't known what it really meant when he first trained for it. Connor had been the only human tie he'd had in the wider world when he left Godric's Hollow, the only one he was capable of having. So long as he kept him safe, Harry had not expected to feel the deaths of anyone else very much.

And he had. And other people had sacrificed enough, too, Merlin knew—freedom and innocence if nothing else. Power. Prestige. Life. Magic. Love.

And just as vengeance cannot answer vengeance...

Harry paused. If he were in an ordinary place, at an ordinary time, he might have said the words, and they would just be words. As he was now, before a mirror to which he could not lie, trying himself in the court of himself, he knew that saying the words would foster and force a change.

He stood on a hill and looked down into a darkened valley lit by lightning, and he thought that he still could have turned away.

Of course I could have. No one made me choose this. Most of the people who love me would prefer something less risky.

It was knowing that he had made the choice of his own free will which pushed him forward, made him say the words which echoed tinnily in the dimness.

“Sacrifice cannot answer sacrifice.”

Aloud, the words did not sound like much.

Inside him, they snatched the flying memories, and welded them together with his steel resolve, and spun a new pattern for him, less a plan of action than a skeleton of will and desire.

By my desire and by my will, I will do this. I do not know how to recognize all the sacrifices I make, not completely, unless I descend into myself every time, and I can't do that.

White fire burned up the reluctance to speak, the desire to keep secrets. Harry yielded it not as a sacrifice, but as something he no longer needed, freely discarded. He drew a deep breath.

I will try to talk. I will ask Draco to help. He notices more than anyone else when I'm hiding. I can't fool him as well.

He chose another thing, and threw it on the fire.

I will have to learn to accept my own limits. It's better to apply a little clever finesse with small power and effort than to strike with great power, wildly flailing, all the time. I will have to ask my allies what spells they can teach me that might actually counteract Voldemort. The Unforgivable Curses don't do it, nor Rosier's spells, nor my own newly invented ones. I tried them all in the graveyard, and he defeated them all. It will have to be traps that take him, multiple combinations of spells, and not straightforward duels. I will ask. I must ask.

Harry took a breath that fanned the flames higher, and another piece of his training burned, another spike of the skeleton burst into flower with his memories and his magic secured over and under it. There were blank places left where Harry hoped he would grow the necessary emotions over time. For now, the will to do the necessary things must be enough.

To learn the spells, to battle Voldemort, to talk, I must have people who will teach and listen to me. That means asking for aid, and holding my patience and my tongue when others seem slow. They know plenty of things that I don't, from growing up with people who did not—abuse them. I should listen. I'll still hate it at first, but maybe I can learn to rejoice in it. Maybe.

He knew he had one more piece of himself left to burn, but this was the most precious, the most long-guarded, and one he was especially slow to give up because it might seem as though he yielded it just to have an easier life. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His Occlumency pools were almost all cracked open, the emotions they had contained blended with the new structure of his mind.

Save one.

Harry plunged his hand into it, and dragged forth his rage and his grief and his hatred and his confusion and his protective instincts over his parents.

He screamed, but not in pain. The darkness spasmed around him, and then broke, and Harry saw his magic spread, clawing at the ground like narrow roots. Where those roots passed, the grass and the earth they had touched simply ceased to exist. Slender grooves cut down and down into the dirt, their bottoms beyond Harry's eyesight. His magic crashed into the wards and the Shield Charms, and strained at them, devouring. Then it spread out and beyond them, and up. Harry lifted his head and bared his teeth at the stars.

I can hate them if I want. I can despise them for what they did to me. I can be madly glad that my magic's free, and not under their control any more.

Jagged dark patterns appeared above Harry, as if he were staring through bare branches at Midwinter. His magic ate the air, and left behind smooth, small traces of airless void.

I can feel pain, and know that I'll be dealing with what they did to me for the rest of my life.

His magic crashed into itself, screaming, and fell out of the sky in dark shards, landing around him in a pattering rain. Harry knew that Fawkes could find him now, but hoped the phoenix would know better than to try.

He held out his hand. The magic shot back to him and coiled there in a ball. Harry passed the stump of his left wrist into and out of it, and when he pulled it free, the skin was blue and numb with frostbite.

I can feel all those things. But ultimately, they're only emotions. And I'm free to feel other emotions towards them, too.

His magic burst free of the tiny ball, and golden light flooded the darkness around him. Deliberately, Harry made it the color of lamplight, not sunrise, the illumination that had once reached through the windows of Godric's Hollow to welcome Sirius or Remus home for the evening.

I can feel pity, if I want. I can feel protectiveness, when all the rest of the world does not feel it.

Harry felt the tears burst free again. Well, of course they would, given the way his thoughts were tending. As he knelt and wept because so much of his life and theirs had been wasted, the voice of his thoughts continued, wild and ringing.

I will not try to stop the trial from going forward. I will not lie. But along with not lying, I am going to tell everything, and that includes why I feel they deserve forgiveness now. If I do know exactly what they did to me, then I can forgive them. Hatred and forgiveness can exist in me at the same time. There is no one to say that they cannot.

Harry cast the last great reluctance within himself on the fire, and felt his mind flare and settle into the new pattern. It was incomplete. There were still things he would have to ask other people to help him with, including Draco and Snape and Connor and his allies and perhaps even the Seers, and Harry doubted that he would ever feel exactly what other people did—that every nuance of his earlier life was detestable, for example, or that love was easy. He might be equal to them, but he was not identical.

And then he was flung back from the distance he'd occupied as judge and jury and executioner of himself, as his mind united again, and the emotions and the tears overcame him entirely.

Sometime later, when his eyes were swollen until he nearly could not see and the eastern sky was lightening with dawn that he didn't remember having missed the beginning of, Harry sat up and stared to the south. He knew Malfoy Manor lay in that direction, and that he would have to go back there now that he'd created himself over again.

He didn't want to. He could acknowledge that.

But this was the first test that he had to put himself through. Before, when someone gave him a new prohibition, like Snape telling him that he must stay within the walls and wards of Hogwarts or Draco promising that he'd hit him with a Stunning Spell if he didn't stay out of danger, Harry hadn't taken it seriously. Those were only limits. He could surpass limits. There was no question but that he would have to, if someone else's life were in danger.

If he had really changed, if he really meant this, then he would have to go back to his very displeased allies, tell them the truth, and let them impose what punishments and restrictions they would. And he would have to do that of his own free will, and truly submit to them, not yield on the surface and plan to keep his promises only if it suited him.

Harry wished he knew how to assume the lynx form outside of dreams, so he had a tail to lash and ears to flatten.

Well. No one had demanded that he creep back with a penitent heart. Only that he come back.

Harry stood, and glanced once at Godric's Hollow. It looked different now, with the hole in the side of the house and half the isolation wards eaten away. It should, Harry thought. He'd gone through enough changes that he would have been shocked if the house had looked exactly the same.

He turned away again, and, drawing on his connection to the wards of Malfoy Manor, he went home.

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

Intermission: Punishments

Narcissa closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall of the entrance hall in the Manor. She had reached the stage where her throat hurt from lack of sleep, but she did not feel able to rest until Harry returned from wherever he had vanished to.

If it were not for his vanishing, she thought, as she placed one hand over her throat and held it there, then she would have counted the evening an entire success. Three of the Weasleys had come out of the house to aid in the fighting, and aside from a few tense stares, they hadn't shown any reaction when they realized who was rescuing them. Narcissa supposed they might even have made

a difference towards driving the seven Death Eaters who had lived away. She couldn't tell for certain. She had no *interest* in telling for certain.

Most of her attention, from the time that Harry went into battle against the Dark Lord, had been focused on him.

Narcissa closed her eyes and shuddered. The fog that had risen around Harry and Voldemort had been like nothing else she had ever seen—as if the heat and power behind a storm had emerged in a form she could comprehend at a glance. She had expected Harry would die at any moment. It might be in the nature of Voldemort to survive such storms, but she knew too well that Harry was only a boy, and one considerably more fragile than he allowed himself to look or feel. So she had fought with her glance continually darting off, split between the duel and her own son.

Draco had done well, and not even given her a cause for panic, save when he had tumbled on his face just as one of the Death Eaters rushing at Lucius's back lifted her wand. Narcissa could not remember crossing the ground between him and herself, only that she must have, but by the time she arrived at his feet, he was climbing back to them. Narcissa had ducked hastily away before he could accuse her of hovering over him.

He *did* need to learn to survive on his own, just as Harry did.

Well, no, Harry already knows it. Narcissa blinked and opened her eyes, her fingers running absently over her neck this time. *And if the War comes to us when Draco is this age, of course he would insist on fighting rather than being left behind. I will have to learn to accept this.*

A pair of hands descended on her shoulders, steering her around and holding her so they could roughly massage the muscles. Narcissa sighed and braced her arms against the wall. Lucius murmured in her ear, "You are thinking about him?"

"Of course I am." Narcissa glanced at her husband. He looked only more like himself, not less, despite the long, thin wound that scored his cheek. "You are, as well."

Lucius inclined his head. "Only thinking that he was foolish."

Narcissa hummed softly and closed her eyes. Adalrico had felt the presence of her cousin Regulus in his head the moment after Harry vanished, informing them all that he had gone to Godric's Hollow. That presented quite a problem, of course, since none of them knew where it was. Draco had suggested letting an owl fly and then following it, but none of the adults were in any condition to fly a broom at first, and Lucius said quietly that if Draco tried to go alone, he would find himself disowned. Then Harry's phoenix appeared, crooning in distress, and Narcissa could see her son sag, giving the idea up. If Fawkes could not find Harry, then none of them would.

They knew where he was. They had only to wait for him to come back.

"Narcissa. Lucius."

Narcissa looked up, blinking. Hawthorn was facing them in human form, her face pale. Narcissa darted a glance out the window. Yes, it was indeed dawn, leaving Hawthorn able to change back. Narcissa let her breath out an inch at a time, and told herself that she had no *proof* that Harry was hurting more the longer he stayed away.

"How are your wounds?" she asked Hawthorn.

Hawthorn shrugged slightly. "I will live." She moved an imperfectly healed shoulder in circles as Narcissa watched, then shifted her weight from her left leg to her right and grimaced. Greyback had bitten her several times. Narcissa had done what she could with the medical magic she knew, and Elfrida, skilled in healing her own children, had helped as well, but they did not dare take Hawthorn to St. Mungo's. The Healers would recognize werewolf bites. They would confine Hawthorn and demand that she register with the Ministry, and, in truth, their only mistake would be in thinking that Hawthorn had become infected this night and not almost two years ago.

Hawthorn was quite insistent that she remain free, and Narcissa could hardly blame her. Their world was not kind to werewolves, or former Death Eaters.

Or to boys who do not know they are abused.

Narcissa winced as the thought of Harry came back to her, slamming harder into her mind for those minutes of being denied. She almost wanted to stand on her toes and look out the Manor windows, but she knew what she would see: dawn, and no one circling back on a broom. It was ludicrous to think that Harry would return that way, anyway. He hadn't left on a broom, so why should he return on one?

A movement off to the side caught Narcissa's eye. She glanced over to see her son standing there disconsolately, his face lackluster, nearly lifeless.

If there was ever any doubt that Draco loved Harry, I would discard it now. Narcissa looked at Lucius to see if he had noticed, and surprised a slight frown on his face. He smoothed it away at once, but she knew it had been there, and knew why. *He thinks Draco weak for expressing his emotions in this way.*

Narcissa suppressed an irritated sigh. She hated the arguments between her husband and son, but she could not interfere in this particular one. They were both Malfoy by blood and birth; she was only so by marriage. She could not force Lucius to declare Draco his magical heir, and attempts to persuade him had resulted in her husband walking out of the room.

Abruptly, the air in front of them cracked open, and a house elf tumbled out of it, squeaking. Hawthorn, wounded as she was, had faced it before any of the others could move, Narcissa noted. She felt a moment's pained envy. There were times she thought she could contract the curse for the sake of a werewolf's reflexes and senses.

"Mifi has come to say that Master Harry Potter has returned," said the elf, which was as far as she got before Draco was trying to half-strangle her.

"Where, Mifi?" he demanded. "What room?"

"The Blue Reception Room—"

Draco began to run. Narcissa hastened after him. She could hear Hawthorn gamely following, and Lucius refusing to walk faster than a dignified stroll. Along the way, they passed Adalrico's and Elfrida's door, and Hawthorn rapped smartly, exchanging a few low-voiced words with them to let them know Harry was back.

Narcissa tasted cautious relief mingling with the worry in her mouth. There was no telling what condition Harry might have returned in, after all.

But when they opened the door and saw him standing in front of the hearth, lifting his head from contemplation of the flames and blinking at them, then Narcissa felt justified in permitting relief and worry to give way to anger.

I promised him there would be consequences for risking his life needlessly. I will see that he suffers them.

Lucius felt the difference the moment he came into the Blue Reception Room and saw Harry waiting for them, his head slightly lifted and his green eyes bright with a mixture of emotions in which the uppermost one was puzzlement. He halted. Adalrico, of course, pushed past him and strode over to the boy, staring down at him.

"You ran away without permission from the battle," he said. "Not telling us whether you were wounded, not telling us why you were going or what you wished to do, but simply running away. That is not the action of an effective general, Harry."

"That's because I'm not an effective general yet," said Harry, lifting his head further to study Adalrico. "I've never been trained to act in concert with others, never realized I should take advantage of their strengths as well as my own. I believe I've undergone an experience now that will let me do that. Will you teach me what an effective general is?"

Adalrico stared. So did the women, and Draco, who had made his way to Harry's side and had one arm clamped around his waist in a death grip. Narcissa was caught the least flat-footed, Lucius saw, but even she frowned slightly, as though she could not understand how Harry spending one night away from them would have changed him so fundamentally.

Of all of them, Lucius thought, I am the only one who understands.

He caught Harry's eyes and held them, confirming his impression. Yes. He was the only one who had made a habit of continually

feeling out Harry's magic, even when he didn't use it to do something overtly impressive. He knew the moments when it grew sharp-edged, and what that indicated about Harry's emotional state. He knew the moments when it pulled in, and Harry tried to hide. He knew when it was spreading, and would probably cause a new storm in a few moments. Years of observing his Lord in this way had been worth the headaches. Lucius had been able to predict better than most Death Eaters what the Dark Lord would do next.

One thing that had always reassured him about Harry's power—though, if asked, he would have said it was worrisome and not reassuring—was its fragility. It never intruded. It rarely pressed, unless he was so angry that he did not think to ask permission. Most of the time, Harry concentrated on keeping it as unnoticeable as possible, with an effort so deep that Lucius no longer thought it conscious.

Now, his magic spread throughout the room, causing a faint, dull, buzzing ache in Lucius's teeth, and did not apologize for itself. Something had indeed changed. While he had to trust that Harry would not declare himself a Lord, he was more Lord-like than Lucius had ever known him to be.

Draco was now demanding an explanation. Harry was going to give one. First, though, he stared back at Lucius, saying that he knew the reason for that continued scrutiny.

And that he no longer feared him.

Harry looked away, and Lucius blinked and loosed a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. His own eyes narrowed as they focused on the side of Harry's face.

He would have to step more carefully from now on. He could no longer be certain of knowing more about emotions than the boy did.

He refused to admit that that made his life a bit more exciting than it had been before. Only children thought excitement an unmixed good.

Draco hadn't said much of anything at first, because joy and rage together were choking him.

He was relieved that Harry had come back safe. Of course he was. He bore no wounds, and his eyes had a look of clear sanity that Draco hadn't seen in them for days, and he wore no glamour over his left wrist.

But the rage...

Surely he was *allowed* to rage when Harry had dashed off and left them with no warning, only a secondary one come through Adalrico's lips? Of course he was. And when he realized that Regulus had told them against Harry's will, not as a precaution, disappointment had almost drowned his anger. He had held off on pressing Harry because he truly believed that he needed the time and the space to heal. And now it seemed as if they only made him worse, as if there were nothing to be done. Harry would reject a too-close concern, but he would not heal without it.

One new thing he had rapidly discovered about himself was his hatred of being helpless. In that way, Draco thought, he was similar to Harry.

So, now, he held Harry tight with one arm, and he could not feel this was a continuation of all the times that had come before, the times when Harry would venture out, risk his life, and return relatively intact. This time, he felt differently. He put a hand beneath Harry's chin and forcibly turned his face from Harry's staring contest with his father. He supposed Harry might be uncomfortable with Draco touching him so intimately in front of other people, but he did not give a damn.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Godric's Hollow," said Harry quietly. He let Draco turn his face, manipulate it, with his eyes reflecting nothing more than a faint impatience. "No one was there. I went there because I thought I should face the home where my parents abused me."

Draco's fingers opened, and his hand fell limply from Harry's face to his side. He found himself staring again. Yes, Harry might have learned that he needed other people to teach him about war in Godric's Hollow—though Draco could not have imagined

how—but that he would face this...that he would come this far...

“You’re lying,” he whispered.

“I am not,” said Harry quietly. He turned just enough away from Draco so that the rest of them could clearly hear what he said. “I am a Legilimens.” Draco saw a start and ripple travel through several of the adults. “I tore my own mind apart with that magic, and put it back together again. Memories, emotions, the truths that I use to guide and govern my life. All of it. All of it got torn apart and burned, then reassembled. I hope that I have a better idea of how to act like a normal person now, though I’ll never be ordinary.” He shrugged, as if he hadn’t just made the most astonishing statement Draco had ever heard him make. “That’s what I went there to do.”

Draco drew a breath. He *wanted* to shout for joy, but rage was easier, and he should be dealt with first.

“That was insanely dangerous,” he said.

“I know,” said Harry, turning and looking at him again. “I’m sorry for the regret and pain and worry you suffered over it.”

“You aren’t sorry you did it,” Draco probed.

“No,” said Harry. “If I were, then I would have to doubt the conclusions I came to. And I don’t. This *was* the only way.”

Draco leaned nearer Harry, and pictured those bright eyes he loved closed or stilled forever, the face streaked with blood and silence, the body crumpled behind wards he could never remove in time to save his life.

He realized he was crying. He could not care. “You could have *died*.”

“I know.”

Draco punched him in the arm. “You *don’t* know, Harry, not if you can stand there and respond in that calm tone.”

Harry pulled back from him, and for the first time in two weeks, his eyes grew wide and flashed. “Yes, Draco, *I know*. I know I could have died. I took the risk anyway. From now on, I am going to try and find less risky ways. I know that I tend to sacrifice myself, and I literally can’t imagine any other way of doing things most of the time.” Harry spread his hands. “You can help me there. But I *can’t* feel just what you want me to feel, Draco. You’ll only get in trouble if you insist on judging me by the way you would react in a situation like this.”

Draco swallowed. He wasn’t sure which he had to struggle with more: the sob or the accusation. He looked closely at Harry.

Harry stared back at him, face bright with impatience and hope and challenge and expectation. Draco felt lost. He did not know the expression.

Then he realized that was because he’d never seen it before.

The world tore open around him, and Draco steadied himself against the sensation of freefall with a few deep breaths. He could handle this. He had been thinking of himself as a changing person, and couldn’t he change to meet this, or in response to this?

Well, yes, I can, he realized. *I thought I’d be a teacher to Harry, though, knowing myself better than he knew himself, able to show him all these wonders that he’d never realized existed.*

I suppose I should have known better than to think he’d sit still that long.

Draco smiled slightly, and that made Harry blink and start back. Draco took Harry’s hand.

“I did say that I would punish you if you ran off again,” he said. “And that includes even for going to Godric’s Hollow and relearning yourself.”

Harry inclined his head once. The gesture was deep, formal. Draco supposed that there was more than a trace of the old Harry left, still, and that made him able to smile as he pronounced the punishment.

“Sleeping spells and Body-Binds and the like don’t do a thing unless they come in before the fact,” he said. “And I’ve decided that I’m unlikely to know every time you’re about to dash off.”

“I will try to be better about that—“

Draco went on as if he hadn’t heard. “You made a promise to me to be better about that, and you broke it. That means that I need some kind of magical guarantee, Harry.”

Harry tilted his head. “You want me to swear an oath?”

“Of course not.” Draco leaned towards him and took his chin in hand again, making Harry look at him. “You would word the oath in such a way that you could get out of it. No, Harry, I’m talking about a monitoring spell. It would tell me when you’re about to leave the building where it’s cast, and prevent you from doing so if I willed it. We can cast one for the Manor, and a new one when we go back to Hogwarts.” He stared straight into Harry’s eyes. “That’s the punishment I want. Can you accept that?”

Harry breathed deeply. Draco knew the impulses passing behind his eyes, because they would have been his, too: the urge to say that this was unfair, to point out that a monitoring spell wouldn’t solve everything, that this was a solution Draco shouldn’t have had to resort to because he should trust Harry’s word.

Against all of those, Draco only repeated, “That’s the punishment I want.”

Harry dropped his eyes, and, incredibly, only nodded.

Draco drew his wand before Harry could change his mind. He did trust his resolve, but Harry might come up with an even better idea in a few moments, one that just happened to be less restrictive.

“*Investigo Harry Potter!*” he whispered. He’d looked up the spell during his one productive hour of the night, imagining what he would do to Harry if Harry had the gall to return unwounded.

Harry shivered a bit as the spell tumbled down around him, but didn’t complain. Draco rubbed a hand across his shoulder. He was still reeling from the knowledge that this had happened and Harry had *allowed* it—and also from the bond the monitoring spell was creating in his mind—but he recognized that Harry needed to be reassured about what had happened.

That done, he let Harry turn to face the adults, to learn what his punishment should be from them.

People’s scents didn’t change that fast.

That disconcerted Hawthorn far more than anything else, though perhaps only because the full moon had shone last night. She kept wrinkling her nose and sniffing, trying to find some trace of the familiar Harry Potter, the one surrounded by pain and fatigue, long after Narcissa had begun, in a level voice, to elaborate why Harry would not be allowed to read any book heavier than one of fey tales for a week, and why he would go to bed the moment the sun set for the rest of the summer, and why he would not, on pain of having her back turned on him, communicate with his parents in any form or fashion before the trial began.

But his scent had changed. Oh, Hawthorn would have known him on the street still, among a dozen other wizards, but the edge of collapse was gone.

That was not *possible*.

Hawthorn did not know much about Legilimency; that was true. And she knew that sometimes, a witch could escape grief and pain by throwing herself into something new. Pansy’s studies in necromancy were proceeding apace because she exhausted her attention in them, to avoid having to think about her father. Hawthorn had allowed herself one night of severe weeping for Dragonsbane, and then she had put her game face back on and continued.

But this...

There must still be buried wounds. There must still be weak points that an enemy could exploit if Harry wasn’t careful.

The problem was that Hawthorn couldn't smell them.

Harry turned away from the list of Narcissa's punishments at last, and caught her eye. At once, he frowned. "Why are you standing differently, Mrs. Parkinson?" he asked. "Were you wounded?"

He shifted just then, and his left wrist came free of his sleeve, and Hawthorn saw his missing hand. She knew Narcissa had said something about that at some point, but since Harry had apparently worn a glamour—an effective one, at that—Hawthorn had assumed she'd misunderstood about his actually losing it.

He'd lost his hand, and he'd gone through a mental and emotional transformation that changed his scent, and he still had the keenness of eye necessary to notice how her stance had changed with the wounds she'd received from Greyback.

Those three facts combined and swirled around in Hawthorn's mind until she didn't think she could say anything other than what she said next.

"I am very well, child," she said. "And ready to follow you anywhere."

Harry's mouth curled in a small smile. That was nothing compared to the emotions his eyes flared with, though, or the fact that he shifted his hold on Draco to put out his hand to her.

Hawthorn came and pressed it, staring into his face. And a question she'd asked herself over and over—whether she had really been right to forgive Harry for Dragonsbane's death, when it caused Pansy such pain—was answered at last.

Yes. Yes, I was. He is making good use of the life that Dragonsbane saved for him.

Oh, my love. I hope you can see him now, that the eyes of the dead are not that different. You would be so proud of him.

It was not proper, most of the time, for *puellaris* witches to be angry. They kept their eyes on the ground and spoke courteous words to their husbands. Outside the home, they were in a world they did not understand, one they had deliberately given up understanding of. Elfrida found it hard enough to focus and function in her day-to-day job with Gringotts. She blushed to imagine confronting men and speaking to them the way she knew her husband had to, all the time.

But when a child was hurt...

Then, it would not have been a proper *puellaris* witch who could remain calm, and Elfrida was very well-trained. She had been a moment from growing fangs ever since she had heard of the abuse that Harry's parents had put him through.

He was a child, and Elfrida would transform and rend Lily Potter apart if she ever came into sight of her. It did not matter that that would break the family alliance, and cause her to bleed to death. It would happen. Her soul made it impossible for things to fall out otherwise.

Therefore, Elfrida knew, she would not attend the trial. Adalrico had told her that Lily Potter needed to live, and be tried. Most wizards and witches would not see the justice in a lioness ripping her apart, no matter what her crimes had been. Harry especially would not see the justice.

So Elfrida had something else to offer him, and when he turned away from Hawthorn, she offered it.

"Harry," she said. His eyes came at once to her face, and she saw the struggling trust in them reflected with wariness. It was a conflict she was familiar with, having seen it in Millicent's face more than once, as she found herself magical heir to her father and began to grow from a child. "I am not going to punish you, child," she said quietly. "I wish to talk with you. Once a week during the summer, I think, and even that often during the school year if we can manage it."

Harry studied her in silence, and then nodded. His expression said plainly that he didn't understand why she wanted to talk to him.

Elfrida bowed her head. He would not accept the reasons if she stated them. She wanted to remind him that he was still a child, that he had plenty of time to come to adulthood. She wanted to help raise him.

And if there was anything *puellaris* witches knew something about, it was raising children.

Elfrida sent a cold thought towards Lily Potter, hoping she could hear it. *You didn't want him. So he's ours now. And I am going to make sure that he knows it. Separate him gently from his family. Everyone else is much too impatient, rushing through this. You can't rush growth. And he will grow. I will see to it. He is not Millicent or Marian, but then, he is not my daughter. He is my son.*

Adalrico studied Harry in silence. He knew things had changed. If nothing else, Harry asking them to train him in battle strategy would have marked it.

He was coming to realize that not enough had changed, though. He had wondered, when he heard about the child abuse charges, why Harry had not contacted them first. Did he not know the Bulstrodes would follow him into the heart of the Dark Lord's stronghold, and that had had been true since he saved Elfrida's and Marian's lives?

Well, no. I don't think that he knows. Did we ever tell him?

They hadn't, Adalrico had to acknowledge ruefully. He had expected Harry to realize, as any child raised in a Dark pureblood home would, what it meant that Harry had enabled a magical heir to survive as well as her mother. Magic was more important than blood. Preserving life would have occasioned a debt, but nothing like what insuring that Elfrida lived as a witch and not a Squib or Muggle did. And Harry had given of his own magic to do it.

Adalrico's mind slammed shut at the thought of such a sacrifice. Only for one of his own children would he have been able to do it, and even then, he would have wanted the promise that they would live and use the magic for purposes he would have approved of, rather than wasting it. Harry had asked for no such promise, merely poured the magic out. Adalrico had actually been the one to stop the pouring, when he could sense his wife's magical presence as strong as it was before she bore Marian. Otherwise, Harry might have given up more and more of his own power.

Their family was what it was because of him.

And they had not told him that.

Well, there is more than one way to remedy that, Adalrico thought, as he arranged to return to the Manor as often as possible during the summer and give Harry private lessons in strategy. I can slip in lessons about what he is, who he is, during my other teaching of him. When he realizes how many among the Dark purebloods regard him—as someone incredibly gifted but willing to share that gift with others...

He will recover his self-confidence. He must. This is a glorious step forward along the path, but it is not enough.

Harry let Draco follow him into his bedroom. It would have been useless to try and keep him out, but this time, Harry actually wanted him there.

He supposed that might change soon, but for today, it had not. He could think of nothing better than curling up and going to sleep in Draco's arms.

As soon as he had finished two letters, of course.

With a soft reaching out of his magic and mind, he called both Fawkes and Hedwig to him. Fawkes scolded him and nipped his ear and scolded him again, visions of Harry dying appearing regularly in his mind. Hedwig softly hooted her disapproval every few moments. Harry ignored them as best he could, and instead scribbled out the notes, while Draco, sprawled on the bed, watched him in silence.

Connor:

I wanted to reassure you that I'm all right. Much better, actually. I thought about some of the things you said, and they helped me

come to terms with the abuse. (See, I can even call it that now!) I hope the Weasleys escaped the battle unwounded. For the foreseeable future, I'll be at Malfoy Manor, so feel free to write to me here.

*Love,
Your brother, Harry.*

He gave that letter to Fawkes, and asked him to wait for a response. Fawkes chirped at him, good humor evidently restored by the chance to act as a messenger, and vanished in a ball of flames.

That left the second blank piece of parchment. Harry stared at it for a while, drumming his fingers on the table, and finally hissed at the hooting Hedwig to be quiet. She blinked grave disapprobation at him.

Draco watched from the bed, and Harry's own conscience watched from within his mind.

Waiting wouldn't make it easier. Harry plunged his quill into the ink and scribbled as fast as he could without making the letter illegible.

Dear Professor:

I was involved in a battle this past night, but I'm safe, and unwounded. Recovering from the effects of a Compression Curse, but that's to be expected. I'm just glad that I took no worse from the Dark Lord.

I tore my mind open with my own Legilimency and created it again, and now I understand why you filed the charges against my parents and Dumbledore. You were trying to protect my future, and me. I still wish you hadn't done it. There were better ways to address the issue. I don't feel up to seeing you yet and telling you that, but you can rail at me by letter, if you want. I invite you to write me back. Just don't assume I'll agree with you for a long time, if I ever do.

He hesitated over the ending words again, but finally wrote his name, and bound the letter to Hedwig's leg. "Snape," he said quietly. She skimmed out the window and vanished.

Then, finally, Harry felt able to lie down in his bed and let Draco surround him with tight, greedy arms. He closed his eyes, and felt Draco press a sleepy kiss to the back of his neck. He shivered. There were ways in which simply accepting this comfort was harder than coming back to Malfoy Manor had been.

But the first step on the road was taken now.

Now he only had to go on taking them—at once a hard task and an enormously simple one. At least he knew that he would never have a harsher judge than himself.

He did consider, briefly, how angry Regulus must be with him, not to have returned to his mind yet, but then he pushed the thought away. He refused to worry about the state of other people's anger when he'd done so much worrying already and Regulus refused to speak. He would explain his actions to Regulus when and if he returned. For the present, he had done all he could.

Quietly, warm and safe and comfortable and loved, he went to sleep.

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

Chapter Eight: Eye of the Storm

Rufus stood in front of the cell doors and idly twirled his wand between his fingers. Mallory, standing at his back, his only guard for the moment, said nothing. The door in front of him said nothing. The walls to either side of him said nothing.

Of course they didn't, Rufus thought. *No one is here to save you from looking stupid, as Grandmother Leonora would say, but yourself.*

He shook his head and opened the door. The warding spells had already dropped to a quiet buzz that would only arrest the movement of a prisoner through the door, and he'd undone the mundane lock. He had no excuse for not going in anymore, except his own reluctance to see the prisoner.

The door swung open to reveal a cell smaller and more barren than usual. It was Rufus's way of compromising: there were instincts he'd developed working as an Auror that demanded even worse treatment than this, but they were joined by ones just as strong that argued for him treating these offenders the same as any others.

Even if they *were* child abusers.

Lily Evans Potter scrambled up and stood facing him as he and Mallory moved into the room. Her face was tense, and if she had lost sleep in the two weeks since she'd come here, Rufus couldn't really blame her. Her hair was lank and dangled around her shoulders, and her green eyes, the ones he'd last seen in her son's face, were half-glazed.

Rufus gritted his teeth. He had wanted to move the Potters' trial as fast as possible, but still had only managed to fix a trial date for mid-November. There were too many people who wanted to look at the evidence, or had a reason for delaying the imprisonment or execution of the Potters so they could gawk some more. Even finding someone to lead the questioning in the Wizengamot, someone who had no ties to either Harry Potter or Dumbledore, had taken forever.

He owed Lily Potter at least an explanation of what would happen. He reminded himself that he never had to see her again after this.

She denied her son sweetness that even the poorest of children can afford. She denied him love. She denied him any existence beyond being the sword that his brother would wield without knowing it.

All of those things were true, but Rufus kept his purpose clearly in mind. When he was an Auror, it had never been this hard. Why should becoming the Minister have changed him so much?

Because you know Harry. You are biased yourself. And it has been years since you saw a child abuse case this extensive and detailed.

Rufus sharpened his mind to a small, clear point of light, the way Grandmother Leonora had taught him, and then said, in a voice he kept carefully devoid of emotion, "Lily Evans Potter, you already know that you are charged with child abuse. I am here to tell you that your trial will take place on the sixteenth of November. You will be tried with your husband, James Potter. Albus Dumbledore's trial will take place somewhat later. Until the date of the trial, you will remain in this cell. You will be well-treated, receive proper food and care—"

He had to stop there, though it wasn't quite the end of the formal speech he'd planned. The memory of the fact that Lily would receive such treatment when Harry hadn't was choking him.

It was unfortunate that he stopped when he did, though, because it provided an opportunity for Lily to speak up.

"You have to understand," she whispered, her eyes glittering with tears. Her face was becoming streaked with them, too, and from the way she winced as she wiped at them, it wasn't the first time they had made her skin stiff and tender. "I did what I did for the greater good of the world. I really *did* think Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived. I thought Harry's magic was unnatural. We had to do everything that we did so the world could have a chance."

Rufus's eyes narrowed. *She really did think that Connor Potter was the Boy-Who-Lived? Why would she think differently now?* He kept his voice polite and distant, however, as he did in the face of declarations from all prisoners, child abusers or no. "You will have a chance to explain everything that you thought and believed in your trial, Mrs. Potter. The Wizengamot will question you, and you will have a chance to call witnesses in your defense. Do you have anyone you wish to call?"

"Yes," said Lily, and her lip quivered. "I know that my son wouldn't like what you're doing to me. I want to call him."

"Which son, madam?" Rufus asked, hoping she didn't mean—

"Harry." Lily gave an imperious little stamp of her foot. "I want him called as a witness for the defense. He knows all the reasons behind the way we raised him. He can explain them better than I can. How *dare* you accuse us without listening to the way he explains things first?" She shook her head and tossed her lank red hair over one shoulder, her eyes bright and hopeful again. "I know that he'll convince you."

Rufus kept his voice bland. *Thank Merlin there are laws in place forbidding this, or I would be tempted to scream.* "The words of

abused children about their abusers are not often trusted in trials, madam. Either they are too vehement, or they protect the people who abused them and try to minimize what really happened.” *That’s Harry in a nutshell.* “Your son will indeed be speaking in the trial, but as the person whom the case was brought *for*. He will be in a neutral place, neither prosecution nor defense but victim, and he will give his evidence how and as he wishes.”

“Let me talk to him,” Lily insisted. “I know that I can convince him to change his mind about that.”

She probably could. Though Rufus hoped the boy was stronger now than he had been the night he faced James Potter, he would still not want to leave Harry and one of his parents alone in a room together. “I will not do that, madam,” he said.

“You can’t keep a mother from talking to her own child.”

That proved too much for Mallory, whom Rufus had felt silently seething behind him, but whom he had hoped would manage to ignore this. “You aren’t his mother!” she snapped. “You’re just the worthless bag of shit whose womb he crawled out of, the one who heaped punishments he didn’t earn on him! I can’t believe that I chose as mild a spell as I did—“

Lily was shrinking away from her, one hand over her mouth, making small fearful noises. Rufus felt a shock surge through him, and then he turned around and gripped Auror Mallory’s arm.

“You did not,” he said.

Mallory tilted her head back and directed a superior expression at him, half-frown and half-sneer.

Rufus could feel himself shaking, he was so angry. He bit off the words as he said, “If there is anything else that you wish to question me about, Mrs. Potter, send word by your guards. From now on, they will include Auror Feverfew.” He opened the door of the cell and stepped back out into the corridor. Mallory still came with him because she had no choice, given his hand on her arm.

Rufus let her go the moment they were out in the hall, of course. He really had lost control, and he hadn’t meant to. Much better to turn, to hide his anger behind a mask of cool disappointment, and to ask, “Why the Unending Nightmares Curse, Fiona? Why did you use *that* one on her?”

“Who says I did?” Mallory examined the back of her hand.

“I recognize the signs,” said Rufus. Perhaps, if he stared at Mallory’s forehead, he would keep himself from snapping. Then she lifted her head, and her eyes met his, fearless and defiant, and he heard himself snarling the words again. “And you said yourself that you’d used a spell. Fiona, I *do not care* how much you hate the Potters, or how much they remind you of your father. I accepted you into the Aurors because you’d reassured me that you wanted to *help* abused children and see the abusers brought to justice, not vengeance. Using this curse is a violation of that trust.”

“They deserved it,” said Mallory.

“*They?*” Rufus closed his eyes, as furious with his own misjudgment of what Mallory could handle as anything else. He should have known. Just because he had become Minister, and therefore less in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the Aurors, didn’t mean he’d forgotten everything he learned about his people. “You used it on James Potter, too?” She couldn’t have attacked Dumbledore, at least, since he was under the Still-Beetle confinement.

“They deserved it,” Mallory repeated stubbornly. “They really did, Rufus. You’ve read the evidence itself, not just the stories in the papers. You must think they merit evisceration even more than I do. But you can’t eviscerate them, and neither can I, so this is the next best thing. Eviscerate their minds instead.”

Rufus shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. It was long moments, and thick breaths, before he could say, “They deserve justice, Fiona, just as anyone else does. And if that includes execution, then the Wizengamot will decide it. I trust them to bring down a sentence of utmost severity. Not only was Harry Potter horribly abused, he is the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and this gossip is so juicy that the papers are still tugging and pulling at it. But to make sure the prisoners survive and get to justice, I trust my Aurors to maintain a professional calm. You’ve proven you can’t do that. As of this moment, you’re off this case, Fiona.”

He opened his eyes to see her staring at him. She shook her head and laughed a bit. “You can’t do that,” she said.

“Yes, actually, I can,” said Rufus slowly. Betrayal still burned like a wound within him, but he recovered some of his own equilibrium as he watched Mallory’s shock turn into betrayal of her own. “You control the affairs of the Aurors, Fiona, and no more than that. The Minister is supposed to be aware of what’s going on in his own organization, and I *am* your boss. I could have you sacked for incompetence, but I’m not going to, because I believe that you can still be just if you try. For now, take a leave of absence from this case. Don’t deal with any of the evidence on it. Don’t come here to guard the prisoners—which the Head of the Auror Office shouldn’t be doing anyway. Don’t give interviews to the newspapers.”

“How long?” Mallory was shaking, her hands clenched at her side.

“Until the Potters’ trial,” said Rufus quietly. “The sixteenth of November.”

“Who exactly is going to take over my duties here?” Mallory’s eyes flared and snapped. “At least half the owls we get nowadays are about the Potter case. Yesterday we got the first feigned report of a magical accident, just to draw my people out of the Ministry so someone could try to get juicy details.”

Rufus hid his smile. At least Mallory was thinking like an Auror again, if she was indignant that her people’s time was being wasted.

“I have someone who’s used to handling plenty of owls,” he said. “He’s helped me work the Death Eater cases, and he did almost all the secretarial work during the last months I was Head.”

Mallory looked slightly sick. “You’re talking about your damn Percy Weasley again, aren’t you?”

Rufus raised an eyebrow and waited.

“He’s your running hound, Rufus,” Mallory grumbled. “He sticks his nose into everything and questions it in accordance with that strict set of standards that you taught him. Yeah, I think he’d do well with the Potter case, but would he really give those bastards and that bitch *justice*?”

“There you go again, Fiona,” said Rufus. “You can depend on the Wizengamot to give them justice. You can depend on Percy to make sure that they reach trial alive.”

A dull flush spread over Mallory’s cheeks. “I wouldn’t have killed them. The Unending Nightmares Curse doesn’t kill, you know that. I want to see them stand trial just as much as you do.”

“Did you ever read about the Unending Nightmares Curse in detail, Fiona?” Rufus probed. “Do you really *know* what it does to its victims? Eviscerates their minds, you said. You aren’t far wrong. But it doesn’t do that just when they’re asleep. They suffer from it when they’re awake, too. The sight of you caused Lily Potter pain. People have gone mad from it. Disorder their minds, Fiona, and they’ll just go straight into St. Mungo’s and be unable to stand trial.” It wasn’t what he wanted to use to appeal to her—he should have just been able to use her own innate sense of justice—but what weapons he had to use to make sure that Lily and James Potter reached trial relatively unharmed and that his Auror didn’t make herself into a worse criminal than she already had, he would.

Mallory looked away and mumbled something.

“What was that?” Rufus demanded, leaning closer.

“I said I didn’t *know* that!” Mallory burst out, turning around again and glaring at him. Her face looked as if it were on fire now, and the air around her blazed with magic. “I told you, I do want them to stand trial, and have to talk about and testify to their mistakes in front of the whole world.”

Rufus held her eyes. *She’s embarrassed. Good. I might have more of a chance of getting through to her than I anticipated.* “I know what you suffered, Fiona,” he said quietly. “Know better than most people.” The redness climbed Mallory’s cheeks again. Doubtless she was remembering the night she’d got pissed and told him most of the story. “And I know that you wouldn’t want to use it as an excuse. It’s a reason, but never let it be an excuse. I know that you’re an Auror because you love and value justice, and not just for abused children. Don’t limit your effectiveness to help others because you want to punish two of them so badly.”

Mallory bowed her head, and nodded. Her magic had retreated into her body again. “I know,” she whispered. “I forgot, Rufus. And I honestly didn’t know what side effects that curse might have.”

“Stay away from the prisoners, Fiona,” said Rufus, with iron gentleness. “I’ll contact St. Mungo’s and summon one of the Healers over to remove the curse. It hasn’t gone far enough yet to hurt her permanently.”

Mallory nodded once, and then retreated in silence up the corridor. Feverfew stepped out of the shadows a moment later, his eyes understanding and his lips sealed, and took up his position in front of Lily Potter’s door.

Rufus turned to make his way to James Potter, wondering if Mallory had used the Unending Nightmares Curse more on him than she had on Lily, or if they had suffered the same amount. Well, the healer from St. Mungo’s could be the one to find that out. Rufus’s business was justice, the clean cutting and cauterization of wounds through legal means, preventing the infection from spreading further. He was no healer of mental wounds.

I leave that up to Madam Shiverwood, he thought, with an inner grimace. I must send Harry a summons to see her soon.

James Potter was indeed different. The moment Rufus opened the door, he was on his feet, obviously trying to look more deferential than pathetically eager. Rufus raised an eyebrow and shut the door, leaning against it. He had not been here since the night he escorted Harry. In retrospect, that had been a bad idea, though he had literally thought the boy would not sleep if he did not see his father.

Let us see what he can say to make up for his words then.

“I’m so sorry,” James began earnestly. “I’d like to make up for everything, if you’ll only tell me how. I didn’t really *mean* what I said to Harry that night. I was just caught up in the shock of losing everything that I thought I cared about. I woke up that morning planning to apply to get back into the Aurors again, and then—well, then I’d lost the chance.” He gave a shrill, false laugh. “But now I know it wasn’t Harry’s fault that this happened when it did. Please, sir, will you deliver a letter to him? I have it right here.” He held up an envelope.

“Impossible, sir,” said Rufus evenly, and concealed the furious fire of his own scorn behind the tidy words. “Your trial is set for the sixteenth of November. You will be tried with your wife only, Albus Dumbledore at a later date. Until then, you will have the best care we can provide you, a clean room and regular meals. It was discovered that your latest guard is not suitable for a variety of reasons, and another Auror will be taking over the post. Perhaps Auror Belladonna—“

“You don’t understand,” James interrupted. “You *really* don’t. I’ve changed my mind. I’ve repented what I said to Harry that night. That means that I don’t have to be tried.”

Rufus felt his eyebrows rise. He really should just leave now, since he knew the explanation would be rambling and pathetic, but he had to admit to some prurient curiosity of his own. Since he refused to indulge that curiosity by reading the wilder newspaper stories, it mostly gnawed at him, unsatisfied.

He might as well gratify the prisoner by listening to the confession he wanted to make, he thought. If nothing else, it would add something to his own personal collection of excuses that criminals made to explain why *they* shouldn’t suffer the full weight of the law. The weakest one so far came from a murderer who’d insisted that his victim told him she wanted to be murdered, conveniently alone and conveniently in just the manner he’d decided to do it.

This one promised to top that.

“Very well,” he said. “Tell me why.”

James openly sagged in relief, but then recovered himself and smiled. Rufus studied his face critically. Even if the man hadn’t been guilty of neglect, he thought, he wouldn’t have hired him. James’s face was just a little too desperate, a little too eager. He looked as though he needed the approval of others to survive. An Auror couldn’t be like that. He had to do many unpopular and unpleasant things, and glory was long in coming and fleeting when it arrived.

“I don’t know how much of Harry’s childhood you know about,” James began, and then paused and studied Rufus.

“I’ve viewed the memories that Severus Snape sent in a Pensieve,” said Rufus. “I’ve also read long letters from him in which he testified to such crimes as your ignoring your wife’s treatment of your son.”

“I honestly didn’t notice,” said James, with a sheepish smile obviously meant to coax the person who saw it into agreeing with him. “I knew that Connor was all right, and I loved my little boy, and he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Is it any wonder that Harry fell into his shadow?”

“There is a long distance between favoring one child,” Rufus noted, “and so neglecting the other that you never notice when your wife is training him to do without touch, in fact to shiver underneath it when someone does touch him.”

James blinked, obviously disconcerted, and then came back to his point. “But Lily hid it well, with Albus’s help. You must admit that. Do you think you would really have noticed anything else than what I did in my situation?”

“Yes.”

James shook his head and threw up his hands. “You don’t understand, obviously, since you’re not me. The point is that I didn’t *notice*. I always found another explanation when I thought I did see something strange. And that’s not my fault, is it, for not being observant enough? I thought Harry was just a strange little kid who liked books too much. I didn’t like books, so I shrugged and thought he would be in Ravenclaw when he went to Hogwarts. Of course I spent more time with the son who was more like me.”

Rufus watched him in silence.

“And then I found out what Lily and Albus had done, via a magical artifact in my home, and I was horrified.” James nodded seriously. “I quite naturally tried to get my son back. But Snape kidnapped him, and Harry never wrote to me, one way or the other, to say how he was. Then, when I tried to get my son back from *him*...well, you know what happened. I never meant to neglect him. I was always trying to do what was best for him. But other people—Snape, Connor, even Harry himself—didn’t notice, just like I didn’t notice what Lily and Albus were doing to him at first.” James gave Rufus a pleading look. “You don’t try people for ignorance, do you?”

“No,” said Rufus, when he thought he could trust himself to keep his voice steady. “But we do try them for stupidity. And I would say, Mr. Potter, since many people have made valiant attempts to cure your ignorance, that what you have is a case of stupidity instead.”

James flushed darkly. “You’re so against abuse, Mr. Scrimgeour, and yet you apply verbal abuse to prisoners?” he challenged.

“My proper title is Minister,” said Rufus, standing straighter. “And if you think that is verbal abuse, Mr. Potter, it is little wonder that you never noticed what your son was suffering.” He turned to the door.

“You’ll speak to Harry?” James asked his back anxiously.

Rufus turned around reluctantly again. He didn’t want to give this spineless coward the time of day. He *knew* James Potter, now. The man bent with the strongest following wind. Let that wind seem to shift towards his wife and Albus Dumbledore again, and he would bow to them and be just as strongly insisting that Harry’s neglect and abuse had been for the general good, even as they did.

But if James was actually willing to testify against his wife and Dumbledore, then Rufus had to use him.

“Will you speak for the prosecution in the trial?” he asked James quietly.

James’s face turned the color of wet ashes. “I explain this in the letter,” he said, waving the envelope. “I can’t do that. Of course I can’t. How could I turn against my wife and my mentor? I just want to get clear of this altogether. I barely saw anything of Harry’s childhood. How could I testify to what you say they’ve done unless I saw the evidence? And that would prejudice me.”

Rufus sneered lightly. *In their own way, Lily and Dumbledore are better than this man. They at least have the conviction that they were doing right, and I know they’ll testify that way, too.* “And what do you expect Harry to do?”

“Forgive me,” said James at once. “Drop the charges. If he decides that he wants to someday, come and live with me. I know that his mind’s been poisoned by Lily and Dumbledore and Snape right now, but when it’s clear again, then he should be able to see that I’ve never meant him anything but good.”

Rufus had to close his eyes to keep himself from vomiting. “Your request is denied,” he said. “Child abusers are never allowed to

communicate with their victims.”

“You brought Harry here that first night.” There came a rustle that was probably James folding his arms. “So obviously you can bend the rules a bit. And I want Harry to see the letter. He would know how to forgive me.”

“He would,” said Rufus. “Because he’s been taught how to forgive beyond all rational boundaries.”

“Surely he’s the only one who can make that decision.” James obviously thought he had a point. “You can’t make the choices for him.”

Rufus opened his eyes and smiled slightly at James. “Actually, Mr. Potter, as he is not yet fifteen, yes, adults *can* make those decisions for him. And right now, his legal guardian is Severus Snape, who has threatened me with death if a letter from you ever comes into Harry’s hands.”

“He threatened you with death!” James pounced on that. “How can you trust him?”

Rufus opened the door, stepped out, and shut it behind him. He knew he was smiling with contempt, but he could not stop it. Oh, yes, he understood exactly what sort of man James Potter was. And he would give a great deal to make sure that Harry never came into contact with him again, after the trial.

He nearly bumped into a young witch hurrying along the hall, her head bowed and sobs breaking from her hands. He jumped, she jumped, and she backed away from him, staring at him in awe.

“You’re Minister Scrimgeour, aren’t you?” she asked, her already pink cheeks flushing pinker, as if he were there to judge the tears pouring down her face.

Rufus nodded, examining her closely. He thought the witch was familiar, but he couldn’t remember why. “And what’s your name?”

“H—Hestia Jones, sir.” The witch hid her face in her hands again. “I applied to be an Auror at one point,” she said, with a low wail. “And then I found out my brother had been arrested for smuggling flying carpets into Britain, and I decided that I had to drop out of the Auror program. How could I stand the shame of it?”

Rufus nodded. He did know where he’d seen her, now: in the newest class of trainee Aurors. Of course, her cheeks had been flushed with pride then.

“I understand if you wanted to take some time off, Madam Jones,” he said. “I do hope that we can count on seeing you in the Auror program again. Someone with an innate sense of justice as strong as yours is always needed.”

Hestia looked shyly up at him. “Thank you, sir. That’s very kind of you to say.” She cast a *Tempus* charm, and then jumped at the numbers that appeared. “I’ve got to go,” she muttered. “Thank you again, sir!” she called, as she rushed away.

Rufus shook his head and walked towards his office with a curiously lighter heart, ready to assign Percy Weasley to his newest duties and owl St. Mungo’s. Sometimes it helped to be reminded that ordinary life went on all around him, never mind the arrest of criminals for child abuse charges and the danger of living in a world with a resurrected Dark Lord and a child with Lord-level power and mental scars.

Hestia paused a moment to make sure the Minister was gone, then crept towards the door of the proper cell. She’d got the information through a hastily penned note, not even delivered by owl, but by falcon. She whispered the incantations that would unlock the wards, and then drew out the copy of the key she’d had made. Sometimes, having criminal relatives *could* come in useful.

She opened the door, and stepped into the room that held the helplessly frozen form of her leader, Albus Dumbledore.

Hestia swallowed as she hurried to draw forth the glowseeds that would counteract the Still-Beetle shell. It *hurt* to see him like that. She’d just joined the Order of the Phoenix a few months ago, but she’d heard tales of Albus Dumbledore, the White Wizard and Lord of Light, all her life from her witch mother. He shouldn’t be standing rooted to the floor with an expression of vague

surprise on his face, all his magic and all his goodwill locked away.

She pressed the glowseeds against his neck and whispered the proper incantation. Red light spread up and down his body, softening his stern outline. In a moment, Dumbledore sagged and nearly fell. Hestia took his arm and held him upright. Her heart still ached with pity, but she felt proud that she had been the one trusted to come to him in a moment of weakness like this.

Dumbledore spent several moments breathing in silence, then lifted his face and smiled at her. Hestia ducked her head, her cheeks flaring again.

“My dear,” said Dumbledore gently, “thank you. But before you go away again, you must press the Still-Beetle shell in your pocket against me, and freeze me once more.”

Hestia blinked. It was true that the note had said she should bring a Still-Beetle shell with her, but she had assumed that it was for the enemies who might get in their way as she rescued the Headmaster. This was so *exciting*. She had envisioned daring escapes. She hadn’t envisioned Dumbledore staying here. “Headmaster—“ she began.

Dumbledore shook his head. “I hold that position no longer, Hestia, so it is inappropriate to address me by its title,” he chided her gently.

Hestia nodded. “Sorry, my lord. It’s just so unfair.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Yes, it is. With Voldemort returned—“ he waited kindly for her to finish flinching at the name “—the wizarding world needs me more than ever. But there are many people who would hesitate to trust me now, given that the charges of child abuse are still so fresh in so many minds, and if I escaped, it would only confirm for them that I was guilty. Even the Order is divided against me. So I must needs ask that you leave me here, frozen again, so that our enemies suspect nothing.”

“Then why free you in the first place?” Hestia whispered. *I wanted to help. Have I really done that?*

“Because the Still-Beetle shell caged all of my magic,” said Dumbledore. “Free from it, I can release some of my power.” He closed his eyes, and the air around both him and Hestia grew warmer. Hestia shivered in wonder. It felt as though it had been winter in the room before, and now she stood on the edge of spring.

“What are you going to do, my lord?” she whispered.

“Change some minds,” said Dumbledore, in a stronger voice than he had so far spoken in. “It is an old spell, one rarely used, because there are so many would use it for wrong purposes, and it is tied to distant events rather than taking place at once. But it is the perfect spell for this circumstance.” He paused, then murmured, “*Converto intellegentiam de Harry Potter! Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia!*”

Hestia felt the spell move outward, a thick, clinging cloud that dissipated as it touched the walls of the room. Dumbledore let out a long sigh, and seemed to age before her eyes. He smiled tiredly at her.

“Now, my dear, if you will touch me with the Still-Beetle shell again, you should go. They will visit me before long. They always do. They do not trust me.”

“Don’t you want something to eat before I go, sir?” Hestia asked plaintively. “To drink?” She had dreamed of helping her hero more than it seemed she would be able to.

Dumbledore patted her cheek. “They would notice, my dear, when they undid the confinement before my trial, if I had unusual food stains on my teeth. Even this release is a risk, but as long as I change nothing about my body itself, then they are unlikely to notice.” He arranged himself in the frozen posture he’d used before, put on the same expression of vague confusion, and waited expectantly for her.

Hestia, catching her lip between her teeth before she could speak another protest, used the Still-Beetle shell on him, and watched as her leader once more froze. She sighed and slipped out of the room, hands clenching as she went.

Albus Dumbledore was still the leader of the wizarding world to those who mattered, even now the Lord of Light. He would save them. Hestia knew it. But she also knew that he was wiser than she was. If he said events had to fall out this way, then they had to fall out this way.

But she wished, more than anything else, that the charges had never been filed, that no one had ever been allowed to look at Dumbledore's sacrifices to keep the wizarding world safe with scorn instead of awe.

Grimly, she turned and began doing up the locking wards on the door again; the note had included instructions on that, from someone who was too notorious to get back into the Ministry without being noticed. He had had injustice done to him, too. That was all right, though, Hestia told herself as she worked. Eventually justice would be done, and just as Albus Dumbledore would lead the wizarding world again, Kingsley Shacklebolt would be part of the Aurors once more.

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

Chapter Nine: Gryffindor's Shame

Minerva mopped at her eyes. They were watering badly, a combination of the poor light around her and the long day she'd had. Once again, she suffered the temptation to go back to the Headmaster's office—*her* office, now, though she still hadn't got used to that—and curl up to get some sleep. Merlin knew she had plenty of her own affairs to occupy her aboveground. There were the teachers to reassure, the Transfiguration courses to arrange, candidates for the various positions held open for her to interview, the papers to placate...

But none of that was as urgent as the work that had brought her down here, she reminded herself, and so she straightened her shoulders and plowed forward. The plop of water echoed in the distance. Minerva tried to imagine exactly where she was in relation to the castle above her, and could not.

She walked a long, sloping tunnel that sometimes stayed level but mostly led irresistibly down and down. It had begun behind a door in the Headmaster's office. Minerva didn't recognize it, didn't remember ever hearing Albus speak of it, and had immediately become suspicious. The first thing she concluded was that it led to more of the Headmaster's mischief. And then she had, on first stepping into it, felt the tingle of wards around her.

The wards weren't the same as they should have been, though. They were tangled, tattered, broken. They didn't reach out to her, but tried to lash and score her face, at least until Minerva drew out the silver Headmistress's badge she'd taken to wearing at her throat. Then they subsided and lay around her with a snarl.

Minerva immediately began following the tunnel.

She paused to lick her dry lips and readjust her grip on her wand. She hadn't cast a *Lumos* spell, since that could dangerously reveal her position to an enemy, but a ball of light that bobbed several feet ahead of her. As always, Minerva studied the floor for a sign of holes or weakening.

She'd just started to move forward when she stopped, nose twitching. Sometimes, when she concentrated, she could use a cat's heightened senses even in human form, and her nose was telling her there was something in front of her now.

Devil's Snare, she thought, and waved her wand. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

That caught her ball of light, dispelling it, but should also have taken care of the glamour that covered the plant. As Minerva conjured more light, she nodded in grim recognition of the mass of green tendrils, which swayed towards her as though starved.

Albus put this here to ensnare anyone who dared walk the path. Now I am more certain than ever that he did something wrong down here, and wanted no one else to know about it.

"*Incendio!*" Minerva said, and the flames ripped into the Devil's Snare, which coiled hastily away, leaving her a clear path through. Minerva edged down the path, and halted on the other side with a little laugh. Impossible as it seemed when the Headmaster had been arrested for child abuse and he had left Merlin-knew-what troubles around for her to fix, she felt younger than she had in ten years.

At least something like this requires skills I know I have, she thought, as she marched forward. *Not trying to think of what people want me to say other than the truth.* That had been the most frustrating part of dealing with the newspaper reporters, as they continually begged her to give them details about the child abuse that did not actually exist.

Or details that Minerva had no intention of releasing. Harry's pale face flashed before her eyes most of the time now, and so did

Severus Snape's almost equally haggard one. Even knowing he had sent an incredibly naked account to the Ministry, Minerva saw no need to imitate him. Honeywhistle and the rest could find the grist for their evil mills elsewhere.

The tunnel curved around a large pillar. Minerva floated her ball of light out of the way this time, and once again cast *Finite* at the carved stone. It shuddered, and flickered, and then several deep blue lights came into being on it.

Minerva studied them from a safe distance, frowning. Most spells that produced blue light were pale blue, for no reasons Minerva knew (the Color Theorists at St. Mungo's were apt to babble on for hours about them, but Minerva had never listened). This was a deep, glinting blue, rather like the cobalt cups that Minerva's mother had used at the table when she was a girl.

She took one step nearer, and then another, defensive spells poised on the tip of her tongue.

Nothing happened until she got nearer the pillar, and then it was only a slight gasp and a widening of her eyes. She could see, now, that wards or spells clinging about the pillar did not cast the blue light. Instead, it came from several triangular stones, each as large as a fist, buried deeply in the pillar itself.

Minerva knew the stones by sight, but only from the pages of books. She had never assumed that she would have a chance to see them face-to... well, rock. Supposedly, they were so valuable that wizarding society had used them up long ago.

And, somehow, she had never thought that she would be seeing them face-to-rock after the Headmaster had been accused of child abuse, though if there was one place the rocks might still be in use, it was Hogwarts.

Minerva counted the stones now, silently, walking around the pillar a few times to be sure that she had them all. Yes. For all their brilliance, there were only four of them. One was carved with an open book, one a narrow design that looked like a valley cut between mountains, and the one lowest down on the pillar showed a strange device, somewhere between a wand and a sword.

The one nearest the top showed a sleeping cat.

Minerva swallowed. Granted, she was taking a risk, and she didn't know if the instinctive associations she had given the gems would help.

But she was a Gryffindor, and she was Headmistress, and she was desperate to protect her school and make up for the shame of her House that Albus had incurred on it.

She reached up and pressed her palm to the stone carved with the cat.

There came a long, deep moan, a rushing wind that gathered up speed and music as it swept along. Minerva stood still as the wind wrapped around her body, chilling her skin, sinking under her clothes. Then the pillar and the tunnel began to move, a circling, stately dance as proud as a snake's.

Minerva went along for the ride, telling herself that she was a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors were not made afraid as easily as all that.

Pressing into her mind, though, was the reminder that she hadn't told anyone where she was going, exactly the kind of carelessness she would have scolded one of her students for.

The dance stopped at last, and Minerva opened her eyes. She was not surprised to find herself in a different place entirely. No one had ever said that anchor-stones were ordinary, and one of their properties was bringing the living person in the web into contact with the dead.

Minerva stepped back, able to remove her hand from the cat's stone only now. She looked around, wondering who would meet her. She had a good idea of whom the other anchor-stones indicated, but any of them might choose to respond.

Or no one, she reminded herself. In that case, she was certain she could touch the cat's stone and transport herself back through the pillar.

Well, fairly certain, at least.

A golden light burst into being in front of her, illuminating the round, bare cavern. Well, it would have been bare to most people

in Hogwarts. Now that she was Headmistress, Minerva could see all the wards, even the ones that had been slow or reluctant to respond to her so far. And this room was covered with them, blending into messy knots from which still more lines of wards led forth.

This was the anchor in more than one way, Minerva realized then. This was the room where the wards all came together, forming Hogwarts's base, the web of webs.

The golden light was separate from the wards, though. It rolled together like the ball of flame a phoenix created in appearing, and then solidified and shimmered, bright as molten metal. Minerva had to shield her eyes until the light abruptly dimmed, and an anxious, male voice said, "Oh, dear. I see that matters have changed from the last time I was here."

Minerva looked up. In front of her stood an older wizard, though his white beard still bore a trace of gold. His robes were golden and red, and worked down their seams with the same wand-and-sword design as one of the anchor-stones. He had green eyes worn by the years, but they stared at her with strong, clear intelligence.

"Godric Gryffindor," she said, because she needed the reassurance, even though she knew it must be.

He nodded. "Or a part of him," he said. "I trust that you understand how anchor-stones work?"

"This is a ghost or a dream of you," said Minerva, with a wave of her hand. "A—a record, of you as you were at a certain point in your life. Left to guard the school and to help the Headmasters of Hogwarts." She was astonishing herself with her own calm speech. Well, perhaps it was to be expected. She had gone a little beyond shock when the wards tried to attack her.

Godric nodded. "The others who remain with you, as you probably surmised, are Helga and Rowena." A flash of anger crossed his face. "Salazar was still here when we bound some of our spirits to protect the school, but he wouldn't agree to do it. Something about never leaving part of himself behind, lest an enemy could get hold of it." Godric shrugged. "But Salazar was always paranoid. You're new, Headmistress. I think your name is—"

"Minerva McGonagall." Minerva lifted her head proudly.

"Ah." Godric nodded. "I remember a Headmaster McGonagall, about the middle of the sixteenth century. A good man."

"One of my ancestors," Minerva acknowledged. "I need to know how much you know about the recent power transfer between Albus Dumbledore and myself, sir. I found one of the anchor-stones carved with a cat, but—"

"We're only magical constructs, really," Godric interrupted. "The school takes care of transforming the stones when it accepts a new Headmaster or Headmistress. No, I don't know much, but your appearing so suddenly like this, and not being prepared to find us, isn't a good sign. Usually, the Headmaster comes with his successor and shows him or her all the secrets of Hogwarts's tunnels at one time. What happened to Albus Dumbledore?"

Minerva sighed and bowed her head. This would take some explaining.

As quietly as she could, she narrated the plan of sacrifice she now understood Albus to have been pursuing, and why he had pursued it. She made sure to mention how Gryffindor Albus had been, and how he found a Lord-level child in Slytherin an impossible concept to come to terms with, assuming that the child would of course become another Dark Lord. She explained the abuse he had inflicted—as much as she understood; she had not yet forced herself all the way through Severus's records—and why she had come rather abruptly into her own office.

Godric was silent when she was done, though Minerva could not tell what he was thinking, since he had turned his back on her. He walked over to the far side of the cavern, and then abruptly swore and lashed out with one foot. It sank into the wall. Minerva winced as she might have if he had actually contacted something and bruised his skin. *I hope that I never have to bind part of myself to an anchor-stone. It must be frustrating to want to rage, and not be able to hit anything.*

Godric turned back around, his green eyes absolutely burning with fury. "He was Gryffindor," he said.

Minerva simply nodded, deciding that Godric would probably come to the same conclusions she had.

"He was Gryffindor, and he did this," Godric went on, his voice rising. He stalked back and forth. Minerva studied his boots, and saw that they skimmed the floor, but she no longer thought he was solid. More likely, it was just conscious practice that kept them

there, since Godric was a different kind of ghost. “What kind of shame has he brought down on our House? How are we going to recover our reputation, teach the others to trust us again?” He looked at her. “You’re Gryffindor, aren’t you? Most of the McGonagalls have been.”

Minerva nodded again.

“They’re going to distrust Gryffindors as they once distrusted Slytherins,” Godric whispered, and then laughed harshly. “What kind of world is it where someone who follows my principles abuses children and someone who follows Salazar’s principles is only interested in freedom?”

“One I need your help to navigate,” said Minerva, seizing what she felt was her best chance. “I know that something is still wrong with the wards; they did not transfer to me as smoothly as they should have when Albus was taken out of power. Can you guide me to the place where the tangling originates from?” She took one more look around the cavern. “All of them here seem neat and smoothly braided.”

Godric stilled for a moment. Then he said, “Of course I will. It is partly my doing that this happened, after all.” He turned towards a corner of the cavern, beckoning for her to follow him.

“Partly your doing?” Minerva frowned as she walked, paying as much attention to the walls as to what she was saying. There seemed to be no door or any evidence of entrance elsewhere than the pillar. She hoped it wasn’t a door that ghosts could get through, but which she was condemned to linger behind. “I don’t think it is. I want to recover the reputation of Gryffindor as much as you do, but you aren’t responsible for the behavior of everyone in your House.”

“I am for this,” said Godric softly. “Some years ago, the Headmaster came to me, and said that he needed to alter the defenses of the school in order to protect the students better. I accepted that, of course, and showed him how to do it. Now I worry that I gave him the key to a door I should never have opened.” He gestured, and the stone in front of them vanished.

Minerva stared. What appeared to be a sheer staircase of white stone soared upward before her, gleaming in the fall of a shaft of sunlight from somewhere high above. Diamond dust, or particles of what looked like it, circled in the air. Minerva shook her head and looked at Godric. “I don’t understand. Are we outside?”

“Not exactly,” said Godric, and indicated another anchor-stone embedded in the rock at the foot of the staircase, so deeply that Minerva had not even noticed its deep blue glow next to the steps themselves. “Just as you can bind a dead wizard’s essence to one of these stones, you can bind the essence of a dead place. Create nearly inaccessible boltholes, because, after all, you’re escaping into the past—but it’s a past cut off from everyone else, so that you don’t need to chance meeting yourself like you do with a Time-Turner.” He held his hand out to Minerva, who hesitantly laid her palm in it, and found to her shock that his fingers were solid. “This was once part of the home where I was born,” he added simply. “I showed it to Albus because no one could get into it unless I was holding their hand. I couldn’t think of a better place for the altered defenses of the school to rest.”

Minerva took the first step up the staircase. It trembled at her weight, and then emitted a shining, shrill note. Minerva trembled back, and shook her head as they climbed higher and higher into the shaft of sun. This was like a dream of Light, and she could not imagine what the home beyond the staircase would look like.

It was as marvelous as she’d hoped. They were still indoors, she saw when the staircase played out, but the house was made of the same white stone as the steps themselves, polished planes that captured light and then breathed it back out in softened but still dazzling bursts. Minerva found herself standing on a broad floor of flat flags, with a gleam of green and gold through distant windows. The green was not the deep, poisonous color of Slytherin, but the fierce color of living trees. The air around her breathed warmth like the height of summer. Minerva could see other pillars and intricate, shining silver and white artifacts sitting tamely on the floor, just waiting for someone to pick them up and use them to create beautiful things.

“This way,” Godric murmured, and swept on across the floor, in the direction of one of the pillars. Minerva followed, still looking around in wonder. This was one of those wizarding places she had dreamed about, she thought, the ones from the days of wild magic and fey tales. Then, the Light had been the minority faction, with more wizards holding allegiance to the wild Dark magic that danced on Walpurgis Night. Midsummer rituals were small and sacred but intense, things of great power, and Light wizards created their homes as bastions of civilization, dedicated to the careful keeping and preserving of valuable artifacts and books—not things to be destroyed as many Dark artifacts were, the moment their owners lost interest in them.

The Light can hurt others—Albus has proven that—but it can also create and hold beauty, Minerva thought proudly.

She heard a distant chime, like angry music, and frowned. Before she could ask Godric about it, he said, “Ah. Here,” and stepped aside from one of the pillars in particular.

Minerva blinked. It wasn't a pillar at all, as she had first assumed from its upright position in a corner of the room, but a statue of Albus. He looked as he had when he strode across battlefields to fight Voldemort, clad in white robes and Light. He had a hand held up as though to calm an excited crowd, and his eyes, made of blue stones that Minerva didn't think were sapphires, gleamed with wisdom and intelligence.

And all about him curled the wards of Hogwarts, diving into his body at various points and then sliding outward again, as though he were a fly caught in the midst of a spider's web. Minerva thought he was more likely to be the spider in this particular web than the prey, though.

“He made himself necessary to them,” said Godric quietly. “That's why the wards are attacking you. He made it so that no other Headmaster would be able to take his place in Hogwarts unless he approved them and was willing to transfer the control of the wards to them. There are enormous holes in the defenses right now because he's not there. And it's only going to get worse.”

Minerva closed her eyes. Even with everything she already knew about Albus, how far he had fallen from the ideals she had once believed him to hold, this *hurt*. She could believe better that he had a particular enmity for Slytherin children with Lord-level power than she could believe that he would want his other students to suffer if something happened to him.

“Why does the school recognize me at all?” she asked.

“Because he did not bind *all* the wards,” said Godric. “I think, now, that he didn't ask for that because I would have got curious and asked too many questions back. He left enough free to convince you, or anyone else who followed him, that you had complete control of Hogwarts. But it's not true. The deeper defenses are decaying. He planned it so that would happen if he were killed or removed from power.”

Minerva shook her head. “And if he'd died of old age?”

“Then I believe the wards would have transferred smoothly, because that's a natural death.” She looked at Godric to see him shrugging. “What he *didn't* want was anyone to have the same amount of power he did, and to make Hogwarts utterly dependent on him. He believed that he was the best one to protect it.” A flash of bitterness darted across the Founder's face. “He told me that, when I helped him create this statue. I didn't listen to where he put the emphases of his words, or I might have known something was off.”

He took a deep breath, tugged on his beard, and then met her eyes. “You're the rightful successor to Albus Dumbledore, and more than that, I think you're someone who will try to set this to rights. ‘Go to a McGonagall if you want bloody-minded stubbornness,’” he said, as though quoting someone. Before Minerva could insist that he tell her who had said that, Godric continued, “And I want to help restore the reputation of the school, and of my House, and of the Light. I'd even like to help this young Lord you describe, if only to make up for the wrong Albus did him.” He paused, his hands tapping at nothing, and then said, “This is going to sound like an odd question, but I can't keep myself from asking it. Call me a foolish optimist.”

“I would never call you foolish, sir,” said Minerva, with a faint smile, and waited.

Godric cleared his throat. “Has this boy—Harry, you said that was his name—spoken at all about being *vates*? Freeing the magical creatures, and trying to foresee paths by which they can live in peace with wizards and witches?”

Minerva stared at him.

“I told you it was an odd question,” said Godric defensively.

“I—that is, yes, he has.” Minerva shook her head. “I didn't know that anyone else would think anything of it, so I didn't mention it in my recitation to you.”

Godric nodded. “Then I am more determined than ever to help him,” he said. “In one way, and one way alone, I think Albus was right to be wary of the boy. Lords *do* change the world, and they can do it without regard for the people around them. Albus was like that himself. But if this Harry Potter is thinking of others... then I want to help.” He sighed, staring into the middle distance. “My dearest ambition, at one point, was to be a *vates*. But I couldn't. I wasn't strong enough. I managed to achieve some remarkable things with dear Helga and Rowena, and even Salazar, when he was still with us, but that was always in cooperation.

And none of the others quite agreed with me about freeing the magical creatures, or which ones should be freed.” He glanced at Minerva. “And now—do you think Potter will pause until all the magical creatures are freed?”

“Not unless some of them tell him that they want to remain slaves,” said Minerva, thinking of the way the Many snakes had come into Hogwarts’ Great Hall the day of the spring equinox. “He has freed Dementors that I know of, and a breed of snakes called the Many, and even the unicorns.” She had been able to feel the absence of the unicorns the moment she ascended into her position as Headmistress, though it had taken her a few days to figure out what it was.

Godric clenched his hands in front of him. “Then I am glad that you came and found me,” he said fiercely. “Albus has brought shame upon our House, but we have a chance to reverse it, and in the best way, by helping someone truly worthy of help.”

Minerva eyed the statue. “And what do we do about this? Can I simply transfer the wards to myself?”

Godric sighed, deflating again. “No. I’m afraid not. Some of the spells that surround and protect this statue are ones that only Albus can undo. Besides, we don’t want you to be central to the wards in the way that he was. What if you fall in battle? That leaves Hogwarts unprotected again.”

Minerva nodded. “And, as of yet, I do not have a Deputy Headmaster picked out.” She knew whom she was going to ask, but delicacy required that she wait a little while. “Very well. Then what would you suggest we do?”

“Coax the school.”

Minerva frowned at him.

Godric flushed a bit. “Ah. Excuse me. That would be Helga’s term for it. She believed that Hogwarts was a living thing. That was one reason she never agreed with me about trying to act as a cooperative *vates*. She was more interested in magical plants and buildings than magical *creatures*. She meant that you have to coax Hogwarts to trust you as you would any wild thing. It’s been hurt by its Headmaster. It needs to see that you care.”

“And?” Minerva prompted. “How do I do that?” She couldn’t help thinking that Godric Gryffindor would have been an irritating professor. Students wanted to *know* things, learn them, or at least the best of them, like Hermione Granger, did. They didn’t want endless digressions around the subject of their interest.

Godric blinked at her, then flushed more deeply. “Ah. Excuse me,” he repeated. “Talk to the wards. Walk through the tunnels. Get to know them. Think often and forcefully of what you plan to do. Show the school that you don’t blame it. Don’t resist any wards that come and attach themselves to you. Find specific holes and repair them.” He nodded. “That will do for a start. Meanwhile, I’ll work on removing the protections I put on this blasted statue. It should start decaying naturally, until it reaches the point where only Albus’s power is sustaining it. Then we’ll call on Helga and Rowena. They’re watching right now, you know.”

He chuckled as Minerva glanced suspiciously around the house. “They’re less proactive than I am, and they attend other aspects of Hogwarts than the wards,” he explained. “Plus, you’re not one of theirs. They’ll approach when they feel the time is right. Show them you can be trusted, Minerva, and I have no doubts that they’ll eventually warm up to you. They need to be coaxed like wild creatures, too,” he added, raising his voice.

A book materialized over his head and fell towards him. Godric dodged it, laughing.

Minerva shook her head. “You’re more informal than I thought you would be,” she observed, unable to stop herself.

“I’ve been modified by contact with the Headmasters and Headmistresses over the centuries, of course,” said Godric mildly. His face darkened for a moment. “Even Albus taught me much,” he muttered. Then he recovered his poise. “I’m looking forward to what you can teach me.” He held out a hand. “Come. I’ll take you back to the entrance where the anchor-stones are.”

Minerva sat up primly when the visitor she’d expected knocked on her door. She’d had a few hours to get over meeting one of the Four Founders of Hogwarts, and to reconcile herself to the extent of Albus’s treachery and betrayal, the evidence that he really had trusted no one but himself to do even basic things like protecting the school. The one she faced now had his own griefs to bear, though she intended to distract him in part by asking him to take up extra duties. She would be calm and kind and

implacable.

“Come in,” she called.

Severus entered and took the chair opposite her, looking more than ever like a bird of ill omen. Minerva had learned to look past the menacing exterior the first year he taught at Hogwarts, though. She stared into his face, and saw the slightly sunken state of his eyes and cheeks, the way he glared at the desk and not at her, and the tight press of his teeth behind his lips.

Losing Harry like this has been harder than he would admit to himself. Minerva knew he had received a letter from Harry the other day, and had written back, but Harry was evidently unwilling as yet to come to Hogwarts and trust himself to Severus’s guardianship. That would tell on him. Minerva was sure that he loved the boy like a son, for all that Severus would deny it furiously if asked.

That is one way it’s better to be a Gryffindor, she thought. *We can tell the truth straight out, without all of this Slytherin lying and dodging, and then we don’t look foolish when we’re caught in a lie.*

“Severus,” she said. “I asked you here to become my Deputy Headmaster.”

Severus jolted, and then stared at her. Minerva stared back at him.

“I always suspected that it was the office itself that caused Albus to go mad,” he said at last, his voice grating and rasping. “Now I have proof. You *are* mad, Minerva. You cannot mean this.”

“Yes, I do,” said Minerva. *And not only because it will force you to think about other things than Harry, which Merlin knows you need.* “I know what you’ve given up, Severus. Do you know what that says to me?”

“That I am an idiot?” Severus was back to glaring at the desk. “That I should never think of ever having a child, when they would act like this?”

“That you are determined to do the right thing before all else,” said Minerva, choking her own impulse to snap at Severus for his self-pity. She would have done it without hesitation when they were colleagues, but she had some authority over him now, and she had to use it properly. “And that indicates a man I could trust to become Headmaster, if I died or was forced to retire. We have endured enough betrayals. I want you by my side, Severus, because I know that you will never stab me in the back.”

Severus stared at her. Minerva waited for some mocking remark about how she should never trust a Slytherin not to backstab.

Instead, he murmured, “What have you learned?”

Minerva told him, wondering if he realized that by hearing these secrets, he was essentially committing himself. Severus didn’t show any awareness of it, but, as his face grew steadily darker and his eyes glittered with anger, as he came more to life than he had since Albus was arrested, Minerva was sure that she had made the right decision. This was a man who valued the good more than his own life or his own pride.

“So you’ll take the position, then,” she said, as he got up.

Severus gave her a steady, unblinking stare. “You are right,” he said finally.

Minerva raised her eyebrows.

“I can believe that the Hat almost put you in Slytherin now,” said Severus, and swept out of the room, which was answer enough.

Minerva leaned back and smiled. She could enjoy the brief glow of pleasure over a victory before she tackled the next problem.

“Do you see? I told you that you would be a leader.”

Minerva whipped around. In the corner of her office, near the door that led into the lower levels of the castle, stood the same cloaked figure who had introduced herself as Acies once before. She still smelled of smoke and fire, but now also of something else, Minerva thought, working her nose. Life, and spring, and light.

“Who *are* you?” Minerva demanded, as she had before.

“Someone you’ll be seeing soon,” said Acies, in an infuriatingly calm tone. “And someone who has a message for you. Listen. This is what Professor Trelawney told Headmaster Dumbledore on a tower a few weeks ago.

*“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.”*

“And what does that mean?” Minerva demanded, though she was already trying to work it out. The thing that seemed clearest was that she could count on Sybill making more prophecies. She wrinkled her nose.

“I don’t know everything yet,” said Acies. “I thought you should know this.” This time, the shadow of enormous wings appeared to stretch around her before she vanished, and Minerva had a distinct impression of wild eyes staring at her.

Minerva sat back, and shook her head. She was weary already of prophecies and the notion of working with one of them, but she had a core of iron determination under the reluctance.

I will not mess this up as Albus messed his chance up.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ten: Argutus

Harry was aware that Draco had been staring at him most of the day, but he’d been busy, first with Elfrida’s meeting with him—and that had been odd, because she’d let him hold Marian again and then talk about how much sleep he was getting and whether his hand, which she knew was missing now, ever ached—and then with trying to decide how to reply to Snape’s latest letter. Besides, the few times he’d stared inquiringly back, Draco had averted his face.

Now, though, it seemed that Draco had had enough. He burst out, “You don’t have to be a hero about it, you know, Harry. You *are* allowed to ask.”

“Ask about what?” Harry looked back up from Snape’s letter. He’d finally decided how he had to respond, but that didn’t mean the words would be easy to write. If Draco had something to say that would necessitate putting them off for a time, Harry was all for it.

“What we’re doing.” Draco waved a hand to indicate the whole of the Manor.

Harry had been vaguely aware that the house elves were preparing a long table in the house’s main room for a celebration of some kind the next day, and he surmised they were also cooking and cleaning within an inch of their lives. He didn’t know what to do about the Malfoy house elves yet, how far he dared to press Lucius about freeing them, and so he’d tried not to pay that much attention. “Yes?” he asked. “What kind of celebration are you having?”

Draco stared at him again. Harry shrugged. “What?” he asked, hearing his voice turn defensive, and picked up a quill. Magic kept the blank sheet of parchment pinned down to the desk in front of him, since his left wrist hurt when he ground it down too hard.

“It’s your *birthday* tomorrow, you git!” Draco burst out.

Harry blinked, his mouth dropping open. He really had lost track of the days. It was easy to do, of course, when the days were an endless round of studying, punctuated now and then by a letter from Snape or an argument with Draco or a visit from Elfrida. Now, though, he really wished he hadn't done that.

"Shit," he muttered. "I have to get something for Connor." He jumped to his feet and made for the door.

Draco managed to dart in front of him. Harry glared up at him. Draco had gone through what Harry sincerely hoped was the last of his growth spurt, and was currently a bit taller than he was. He used it to his advantage now, leaning down and glaring back into Harry's eyes. "And where do you think you're going?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry in exasperation.

"By *yourself*?" Draco looked perfectly scandalized. "Of course not, Harry."

"It's still daylight." Harry turned to study the sun coming in through the library windows, just in case. If he'd lost track of the fact that he had to get a birthday gift for Connor, he might well have managed to lose track of what time it was. He nodded and glanced back triumphantly at Draco. "See? I'll ask your mum if she'll go with me." Privately, he thought this ridiculous. He could defend himself better than anyone else, and he would only put Narcissa's life in danger. But since he'd rebuilt his mind, he'd found it paid to humor the people who loved him like this.

"She's busy with the preparations for the party," said Draco.

"*Why* is there going to be a party?" Harry could hear his voice getting plaintive, but he thought it had a right to. Draco and the Malfoys had given him gifts for his birthday before, of course, but they'd never thrown him some kind of extravagant celebration. "There doesn't have to be."

"Because Mother wants to invite your allies," said Draco. "Even the new ones, the ones who might not have carried away a very good impression of you from last time. Give them a chance to see what you look like when you're strong, and to meet each other." He snorted. "I can't wait to see the expression on Edward Burke's face when he sees that Tybalt Starrise's been invited. He thinks Light wizards have no place in a Dark wizards' gathering."

Harry frowned. "When are they coming?"

"Late morning, early afternoon." Draco seemed more relaxed now that he believed Harry had given up any intention of going to Diagon Alley. "Mother thinks a few of them will probably arrive before then, though, to talk to you as privately as they can."

"Then I have some time to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow morning and buy a gift for Connor," said Harry hopefully. "Maybe even take it to him myself—"

"Harry." Draco folded his arms. "You can make a gift for your brother. I've seen you do it before. And you're not going anywhere outside the wards."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I *still* think Bellatrix being outside the wards that day is a coincidence, Draco. And she ran the moment she saw your mum, anyway." Narcissa had still managed to inflict a curse on Bellatrix that she had said, cheerfully, would feel like a living thing trying to claw its way out of her belly. Harry had found himself wincing and wondering if there should be a limit to the oath of vengeance Narcissa had sworn, but then he'd looked into her face and known better than to say that.

"I don't think it's a coincidence, Harry." Draco's voice was still light, but it had frosted over, and Harry knew he was going to lose this argument, unless he actually wanted to Apparate through the Manor's wards, find a gift, and then dare to come back and face Draco's and Narcissa's wrath. "Besides, the last owl you sent your brother came back dazed, remember? I don't think the wards they've got him under, wherever he is, will let one through this time, either."

Harry scowled. He didn't know where Connor had been moved after the battle at the Weasleys—Connor had said that he couldn't tell him, just in case the letter fell into the wrong hands—though his brother could send post to him. He'd said he was cheerful, that he hadn't been wounded in the battle, that he was glad Harry was safe, and many other things Harry had found reassuring at the time. Now, though, he was longing to know exactly where those owls came from, and wishing he'd receive one tonight. Perhaps he could persuade it to stick around and take a present back.

"Why are you worrying so much about buying a gift for your brother?" Draco repeated, his voice gentle and coaxing.

“Because I don’t have any ideas for making one.” Harry turned to pace around the library, trying to run his left hand through his hair on instinct, and then snorting as the hair raked along his wrist instead of over his fingers. “It has to be perfect, Draco. I want it to say something about the last year, and who we are, and what we’ve done—“

“Hush, Harry.” Draco had come up behind him and put his arms around him. Harry squirmed uncomfortably. Lately, Draco didn’t do this when Harry needed comfort, but any old time he wanted to. “You’ll think of something. I know you will. And if you can’t give it to him until after the summer, then that’s all right.”

Harry started to say it *wasn't* all right, and then stopped, eyes widening slightly. For whatever reason, Draco’s words had sparked an odd chain of thoughts in his mind. When the summer was over, they would go back to school, and thanks to the lack of a Triwizard Tournament this year, he and Connor would both be able to play Quidditch. In a moment, he’d thought of the perfect gift for his brother.

“Excuse me, Draco,” he said, and elbowed gently at his arms. Draco let him go with an amused little snort.

“Had an idea, didn’t you?”

Harry nodded distractedly and jogged to the other side of the library. The books he needed were on the top shelf, where he’d noted but not read them the first day he was here. Luckily, Narcissa’s punishment on reading heavier books than ones of fey tales had expired; Harry had found it exquisitely frustrating while it lasted. He pulled out two of the weightier tomes and then curled up in a chair to read.

Draco watched Harry for a moment. He could feel his emotions, humming like a hive of bees, and also, if he really concentrated, his muscle movements, sometimes presaging what he would do next.

His gift continued to change, and Draco was not sure what he was going to do about it.

Or how he was going to tell Harry, for that matter.

Draco had opened his eyes a few days ago to find that he was opening his father’s eyes, not his own. He’d lain still, caught between fear and curiosity at the feeling of limbs so much heavier than his, the sensation of long hair and sleeping robes instead of pyjamas, the soft sound of his mother’s snoring in his ear.

He’d concentrated, and managed to hop back to his body. But then he’d lain awake and silent, still afraid.

He had known without having to think about it that he could have commanded his father to stand, stretch, yawn, scratch himself, speak words that were words of Draco’s devising and not his own. It had felt even easier than with the Death Eater Draco had attacked. It was not compulsion, not the way that Harry had described his brother’s ability to Draco. Compulsion functioned on the mind only, and could be resisted. This was the knowledge that Draco could manipulate other peoples’ bodies like puppets to his will.

He could imagine how useful it would be in battle.

He could imagine how much Harry, with his love of free will, would hate it.

Draco shivered before the thought of telling him. It had to happen sometime, of course, even though Draco had never intruded into Harry’s mind and never planned to without invitation. But every day that Draco could put it off, and had no more wandering incidents in the nighttime, was one more that he could bask in the glow of Harry’s unrelieved regard, and know that Harry never suspected him of more than, in Harry’s view, an odd desire to touch him too much.

Draco straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath. He had promised himself that he had changed, would change, and he knew that the kind of person he wanted to be would have told Harry as soon as the moment seemed right after the battle. Besides, the moment was coming when he would have to push Harry, gently, to get other things he wanted. Back down from that, and he would never have the equal footing in their bond that he so desperately yearned for.

A flutter of wings pulled his thoughts from their descending spiral. Draco turned, and watched two great horned owls swoop

through the window. Suspended in a net between their claws was a large green box, bearing the coiled silver serpent that marked Coluber House.

Draco accepted the box, hearing the delicate press of scales as something slithered around inside, and paid the owls with some of the Sickles he'd been carrying in his robe pocket in anticipation of the delivery. They bobbed their heads at him and soared away.

“What have you got there?”

Draco cradled the box against his chest and didn't turn around, despite Harry's curious question. “A birthday gift for you,” he said loftily. “You'd better not try to see what it is.”

Harry laughed at him, though the sound had a tinge of sadness. “Draco, you don't need to buy anything that it takes two owls to deliver,” he said. “But thank you. I won't try to see it, or guess.”

Draco crept out of the library, casting several suspicious glances over his shoulder to keep the joke running, and then took the box to his room. One glimpse inside reassured him that the Omen snake looked the way he was supposed to look, compared to the pictures in the books Draco had studied. He dropped a few of the stunned crickets he'd also prepared into the box, and heard soft crunching a moment later.

Draco flopped back on his bed, then winced. Beds in Malfoy Manor were not really made for flopping on, however comfortable they were for sleeping. He folded his hands behind his head and uttered a long, deep breath.

I'll wait to tell Harry about my ability. I think I have to. The gift I give him tomorrow is going to be hard enough for him to stomach.

Harry delicately wound a tendril of magic around his fingers and then stood back, nodding. The seven tiny Quidditch players he'd created, adapting a spell from one of the Quidditch books that teams used to predict strategy, zoomed around their artificial pitch, Transfigured from a piece of parchment. Harry grinned at them. They wore the robes of the Chudley Cannons right now, but they would change their colors depending on the team names that Connor spoke to them.

It was not, perhaps, the perfect gift, but it was one that would have meaning to Connor, and certainly did to Harry. *Here's something that you enjoy, and which hasn't had a chance to be tainted by the last year.* He might even write those words in the letter he hoped to send his brother, but probably not. He trusted Connor to understand his meaning.

He sighed and cast a glance at the clock above the mantelpiece in the library. It was already almost nine, and he didn't know how much longer he'd have before the guests started arriving. If it weren't for Narcissa and her punishments, he could have stayed up late last night and finished this, but Narcissa actually *checked* on Harry to be sure that he went to bed at the time she'd assigned him. Harry was disappointed in her. Yes, he had promised to obey the limits she set, and he was, but these were silly ones. His cheeks stung just thinking about them.

That's probably why she did it: to make you feel so humiliated that you won't think of running off again.

Harry huffed a breath, and then looked up hopefully as a house elf came in with a confused-looking owl perched on its arm. Sure enough, the owl had a small box hooked to its leg. Harry held out his own arm and whistled, and the owl launched itself to him, delivering the package and the letter to him with a solemn air.

“Wait a bit?” Harry asked, while smiling his thanks at the elf. “I have a package for you to take back, if you're willing.”

The barn owl fixed him with wide golden eyes, as much to say that she couldn't do that.

“I have a dead mouse here,” Harry added. And he did, lying beside him under a preservation spell. When he realized he might have to tempt the owl that came from Connor, he had thought he'd want to have the best temptation possible. “It's yours if you take the package back.”

The owl swiveled her head, but at least she hadn't refused outright. Carefully, Harry shrank the Quidditch player set and put it into its box before he opened the letter Connor had sent him.

To my brother Harry, happy birthday. Have some fun this year.

Love, Connor.

Curious, Harry opened the small box, and smiled at what lay inside, struggling furiously against its bonds. It was a Snitch, but slightly larger than normal, and as Harry watched, it flashed with various colors, then turned clear and almost vanished from his sight. Snitches like this were sometimes used to train serious Seekers, but mostly they were children's toys, intended to amuse.

"It looks like we're thinking along the same lines," Harry muttered, and then set aside the Snitch to pick up the box containing the Quidditch player set. He eyed the owl coaxingly. "The mouse is yours, if you just take this back."

The owl hopped in place. Harry grimaced a bit as she cut his arm and trails of blood started to flow from beneath her talons, but he kept his stare steady, and in a short time, she inclined her head and permitted him to tie his box and note to her leg. Then she stared imperiously at the mouse. Harry laughed, ended the preservation spell, and tossed it to her. She sat on his arm and happily fed until the mouse was gone, then turned and launched herself past the startled house elf, who chased her.

Harry turned around with a chuckle, just as the fire in the hearth flared green and Henrietta Bulstrode stepped through.

Harry lifted his eyebrows and studied her. Henrietta stared back for a moment, as though she hadn't expected to find him there. Then her mouth curved in a smile that couldn't fool him. Harry had seen eyes like hers before, in pictures of hunting great cats.

"Hello, Potter," said Henrietta. "Happy birthday." She placed a carefully wrapped box on the mantelpiece. "I trust that I find you well, though you seem to have deprived yourself of a hand since the last time I saw you."

Harry concealed a snort. *Is that the best she can do?* He hadn't worn the glamour of his left hand since returning from Godric's Hollow, and of course Elfrida and Adalrico had seen, along with Hawthorn, and the word had spread among the Dark purebloods. "Hello, Mrs. Bulstrode," he said, not even bothering to respond to her barb. "Many thanks for the birthday wishes. Did your daughter come with you?"

Henrietta twisted her head, rather like the owl. "She did not. But I will tell her that you asked after her. Many a young witch might be happy to hear that you were interested in her fate."

Harry concealed another laugh. *Why is she being so obvious? Well, after all, I was weak the last time she saw me. That probably factors into it.* "I wish her all the best, of course," he said. "I can imagine the sight that she'll make in a few years, when she's come into her power and her beauty." Henrietta's eyes brightened, which made it the perfect moment for Harry to add, "Of course, she would receive an invitation to my joining."

Henrietta blinked and stared at him. "Your joining?" she asked, and then obviously hated herself for ever saying something so inane.

Harry smiled at her. "You must have heard of that, too," he said. *Patronizing, just the right amount of patronizing in my voice—and oh, how her eyes flash!* "That Draco Malfoy and I are most likely going to be joined," Harry clarified, and added a few more dollops of condescension into his voice for good measure.

There passed a few moments during which Henrietta simply breathed, and then she dropped a curtsy. "Let me be one of the first to wish you congratulations then, Mr. Potter," she said.

"Oh, most people already have." Harry wandered to the library door, smiling over his shoulder at her. "But I accept your good wishes just as I accept your birthday wishes. Come this way, please, and you can put your gift with the others. I'll see that you receive some refreshment, too, Mrs. Bulstrode. Do you prefer wine? Perhaps not this early in the morning, hmm? Pumpkin juice might be better."

He turned forward again, before his victorious grin could become visible. He still thought this whole extravagant birthday celebration was a ridiculous idea, and could not tell why the Malfoys had planned it—even as a convenient excuse to gather his allies, there was no reason it had to be so lavish—but he might as well use it to have fun with someone who thought his control of the alliance fragile.

Henrietta stood where she was for a moment, eyes narrowed and focused on the door.

I acted stupid.

And it was my own fault.

Grimly, Henrietta ran the memory of that first meeting over in her mind, even as she gathered the gift she'd ordered for Potter up and followed him down a corridor and into the massive, sunlit central room of the Manor. She could still remember Potter's pale face, the staring eyes that indicated he was thinking of his own ends before anyone else's. She had thought him a fanatic, and easy to trick and delude as all fanatics were. He had magic, of course he did, but he wore only the appearance of power, and she could drape him over herself like a cloak easily enough.

That boy was nothing like the one who confronted her now, turning her barbs with ease and seeming utterly unashamed of his lack of a left hand.

Henrietta raised her eyebrows at the long table, already set with a few gifts, and placed her own among them. Well. She had made her mistake, and she had paid for it with a few moments of humiliation.

She intended to pay with nothing else. She had listened to the stories about Potter when ordering her gift, even as she let her own impressions of him order her behavior. The gift was one for a more dangerous man, adapted to Potter's unique circumstances. It might have shattered him if he were really as weak as she thought. Now Henrietta could be thankful for her foresight. At the very least, it would inflict a deep wound.

She turned and summoned a smile to her face even as she saw Honoria Pemberley, of all the Dark witches in her acquaintance the one she despised the most, come towards her with her hand out. Henrietta tried to take the hand, and it vanished. Pemberley giggled.

Henrietta simply nodded, as though amused at the trick, and waited. Potter would open her gift soon, and she could be content in the knowledge that he would suffer when he did.

"...and then he ate the *whole* thing!"

Harry couldn't help smiling as he listened to Honoria Pemberley narrate the tale of the pudding she'd created with illusions, and which her father had attempted to eat gamely despite most of it vanishing and bending around his spoon. She was an accomplished illusionist, she reassured him, strong enough to create the glamours of taste and scent which had fooled her father. Harry resolved to keep that in mind whenever he was dealing with her.

"Potter." Thomas Rhangnara had all but bounced up to him, with a woman Harry hadn't seen before at his shoulder. "This is Priscilla Burke, my wife. Well, she was Priscilla Burke when we married. She's Priscilla Rhangnara now. That is, if she changed her name." He turned to his wife with a slight frown. "I keep forgetting to ask, dear. Did you change your name officially, or didn't you?"

Priscilla smiled tolerantly at her husband and held out her hand to Harry. She was a tall woman with a fall of golden hair that looked longer than it was thanks to the length of her neck. In reality, Harry saw, it stopped just short of her shoulders. Her eyes were large and wide and as green as his mother's, but both harder and warmer, like jade put in a fire. "It's Priscilla Burke still, dear. I wanted it to be." She turned her attention fully to Harry. "Auror Priscilla Burke, technically. And yes, that's possible because I've never Declared. Neither Scrimgeour nor Mallory would have tolerated a Dark Auror working in their department."

"You really should Declare, my dear," said Thomas chidingly. "I told you, the Dark has the best arguments. True Dark wizards work individually, yes, but in patterns that collapse and change according to the wills of the wizards involved. Think of constellations. Stars can move. Do they shine the less brightly for that? No, they don't. And of course they can be grouped into different constellations. Take Achernar—"

Priscilla guided her husband away with a firm hand on his elbow, and an eyeroll at Harry that told him she knew well how to manage Thomas. Harry found that oddly reassuring. He *wanted* people at this celebration who were less than focused on him. Thomas was the only one he could absolutely count on to be so, though.

For example, he was acutely aware of Henrietta's eyes on him every time he moved, and Draco's as well.

Henrietta's scrutiny he could understand, but Draco's seemed to have something to do with his gift, given the way his gaze darted back and forth between Harry and the box sitting on the table. Harry caught his eye and smiled, trying to reassure him that he would love it, whatever it was. Draco looked away.

Harry rolled his own eyes. *Fine. Be like that. He probably thinks he would manage me like Priscilla manages Thomas, but I think I could return the favor a time or two.*

Then he blinked and touched his head. *I don't understand myself sometimes. I still don't know if I'm going to survive the War, and I'm thinking about Draco and me joining?*

He shook his head and glanced about for Narcissa. It was nearly noon, and from the look of it, no more allies were due to arrive. Edward Burke was the only one missing and he had already sent a sneering letter saying that, due to the unfortunate presence of the halfblood Honoria Pemberley, he preferred to stay home and wait for a more dignified occasion of celebration.

He'll either get over that or stop being my ally right quick, Harry thought, even as Narcissa caught his eye and nodded at him.

"Thank you for coming," said Harry, casting a mild *Sonorus* on himself so that his voice captured everyone's attention at once. "If you would sit down at the table, we do have a meal planned for you."

His allies moved to take their places. Harry sat at the head of the table, of course, flanked by Draco and Narcissa. Lucius took his place next to his wife, but Harry was curious about where the others would sit.

Henrietta, he was amused to see, took a position exactly in the middle of the left side, neither far from him nor near. Honoria, Tybalt Starrise, and his joined partner John gravitated together into a giggling, arguing, sometimes sneezing clump. Ignifer took a seat next to Lucius, sitting bolt upright and returning him blank proud look for blank proud look. Mortimer Belville sat on the other side of Henrietta, a safe distance back from the table, so that he wouldn't get food on his robes, Harry thought. Thomas would probably have stood if he were allowed, or wandered from place to place talking, but Priscilla took his arm and guided him gently to a seat next to Draco. Charles and his wife Medusa, whom Harry had met only in passing thanks to Honoria insisting on monopolizing his time, sat a few chairs down on the other side of Ignifer. Harry had to admit he approved of that. Charles was obviously a cautious man, and though his presence here bespoke his allegiances, he stood as near to neutrality as he still could while Harry paid him no special notice.

Hawthorn took the seat next to Ignifer, ignoring the woman with easy grace. Elfrida and Adalrico were next to her, Elfrida cooing softly to Marian and not looking up often. A permanent blush seemed to stain her cheeks. Harry could hardly credit that this was the same woman who had sternly asked him questions about his health yesterday. She was very different now—but then, *puellaris* witches were trained to be fierce only in defense of their children, and to act as modest and retired as possible in public.

Harry wondered, as the house elves carried in plates to everyone except him—he was casually levitating his lunch out of the kitchen instead—what his allies would think of the meal.

Mortimer was the first to react, staring down at the plate as if it were covered with worms and not pasta. "Potter," he said. "There must be some mistake. Birthday dinners between the ages of fourteen and sixteen traditionally begin with stuffed quails. The birthday dinners of Auglorious the Red began the custom," he added, and then paused, as if he were waiting for Harry to ask who Auglorious the Red had been.

Harry didn't intend to give the pompous scholar the satisfaction. "Not just pasta," he said, and then poured the bowl of tomato sauce that had floated after his plate over the pasta, casually hovering the dish just over his left wrist. "Spaghetti. I like it." He smiled at Mortimer. "Do eat up, Mr. Belville."

Mortimer looked as if he could conceive of nothing more horrifying, probably because the sauce would tend to get on his robes. He extended his fork and poked at the pasta, and then shook his head. Harry noted that Honoria, Tybalt, and John had all dug in with squeals of recognition and delight, and Narcissa, who had known about this from the beginning, was eating with resignation, but most of his other allies were staring at him. Draco poked the spaghetti several times with his fork before seeming to understand that it wouldn't hurt him.

"Isn't this a *Muggle* food, Potter?" Charles Rosier-Henlin asked at last, his voice fascinated.

“In origin, I think.” Harry levitated a napkin over to himself and dabbed at some of the sauce that had already escaped onto his chin. He was more thankful than ever for his magic since he’d lost his left hand. He could use it to do simple things like wipe his face without letting go of his fork. “I don’t really know that much about it, just that I like it.”

He went back to eating, and gradually, one by one, his allies did the same. Harry knew he was still receiving stares, and felt entertained. They would be seeking some subtle message in his choice of food.

The only one Harry intended was quite simple and obvious, really; he thought it was more significant that he was eating without house elves serving him, though they had still cooked the food (which he was unhappy about, but Narcissa had refused to allow him in the kitchens). *I am stronger than I was at one point. And in minor matters, I’m going to do as I like.*

Finally, everyone except Mortimer had finished, and he pushed the plate away as though glad to have an excuse for quitting. Harry heard him fervently muttering cleaning charms to himself as the house elves came out and fetched their plates away—with the exception of Harry’s, which had tamely taken itself back to the kitchens already.

“I suppose I should open my gifts now,” said Harry aloud.

“Please do, Potter.” Henrietta Bulstrode was leaning forward, her eyes bearing the gleam of a hunting cat. “Open mine first, if you wouldn’t mind. I spent some time fussing over my choice.”

“How wonderful, madam,” said Harry casually, even as he summoned Henrietta’s box to him. “You’ve only had a week to know about this.” Narcissa had told him that much yesterday, when he’d tried to talk her out of a large birthday celebration and failed. “It must have been a lot of fussing concentrated into a small space of time, and yet it doesn’t show on your face at all.” He smiled at Henrietta, and then opened the box with a snip of his magic.

“Well, it’s very small, Potter, but it *is* what I want to give you,” Henrietta was saying.

Inside the box lay a gleaming left hand, sculpted of silver. Harry had seen a few wizards wearing them in the past, long before he had any reason to be interested in them.

He raised his eyebrows and glanced up at Henrietta. Her eyes devoured his expression. Obviously, she’d hoped he would flinch, be hurt, panic.

“It’s handsome,” Harry admitted, letting his magic levitate the hand out and spin it front of his face. “Unfortunately, the wrist is a bit too big to attach to mine.” He smiled at Henrietta. “But I appreciate the thought, and even the pun. It was very clever of you, to think about giving me a hand.”

Someone giggled. Harry thought it was Honoria. The rest of his allies were sitting in absolute silence. Harry directed his beaming smile around the table, then laid the hand and the box both aside. He did detect a flash of stunned disbelief in Henrietta’s eyes before her face smoothed again.

She expected me to be ashamed of being crippled, then. I’m not. This is a war-wound. I’ll leave the glamour off, not draw attention to it unless I’m asked, and then admit to it. Neither hiding nor flaunting is the way to go. This is just part of who I am, at least until I figure out how to break the last of Bellatrix’s spells.

He grinned at Honoria. “Should I open yours next?”

“Oh, *please* do.” As he called her box to him, Honoria made tiny hovering phoenixes follow it and chirp at the ceiling. Harry opened it with a sense of real curiosity. He didn’t know what whim of hers Honoria might have gratified in choosing a gift.

He found a silver whistle, and held it up with his hand, letting it spin on its chain. “What does this do, madam?”

“Blow it,” Honoria suggested, and then began laughing aloud.

Harry concentrated, but couldn’t identify any Dark magic on it. He shrugged, put the whistle to his lips, and blew.

Everyone sitting around the table promptly burst into laughter. From the looks of things, they wanted to stop laughing, but they couldn’t. On and on they went, as if they were being tickled mercilessly. Mortimer Belville actually fell out of his chair. Medusa

Rosier-Henlin was holding her sides in pain. Lucius's eyes were furious above his distended mouth.

Though Honoria hadn't told him how to stop the effect, Harry decided that he could do worse than blow the whistle again. As the shrill sound echoed around the room, everyone relaxed and stopped laughing. Lucius's face had gone icy.

"That was a *ridiculous* gift," he told Honoria.

"Was it?" Honoria tilted her head to the side. "I don't think it was. Think about it, Mr. Malfoy. Harry here blows that whistle at his enemies, they start laughing, and he escapes." She shrugged, looking extremely smug. "And they won't easily think the whistle is a weapon, either, because it's my own invention, and not registered with the Ministry."

Harry nodded at Honoria and put the whistle back in its box. He wasn't entirely sure if he approved of her doing that and embarrassing his other allies, but at least she'd been laughing right along with the rest of them—and the whistle hadn't affected Harry at all. He could take it as a protective gift, if he wanted to. He still wasn't sure he could trust her.

But she is fun, he had to admit.

Several of the other gifts were more prosaic—a set of fine robes from Mortimer Belville, a tiny mechanical lion that paced and roared from Tybalt and John ("to bring some Gryffindor influence back into your life," according to Tybalt), a book on Quidditch from Charles and Medusa. Harry smiled at Charles, understanding the import of the gift. They weren't pretending to know him better than they did, and they were still making a statement of neutrality. Charles would have known that he liked Quidditch from Harry's conversation with Owen at the last meeting. Harry nodded at him as he put the book aside, and received a surprised glance, followed by a slow relaxation, from Charles in return. Medusa leaned her head on her husband's shoulder and smiled widely in Harry's direction.

He was utterly unsurprised when the large, flat packet from Thomas and Priscilla turned out to be a book on the constellations. He nodded to them as he stroked the cover. "Thank you."

"There's also philosophy inside," said Thomas eagerly. "All about the comparison of Dark wizards to stars, and how—"

"Dear." Priscilla put her hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to spoil the book for Potter? I know that you don't like it when someone does that to you."

Thomas's eyes widened in horror. "Of course not! I'm sorry, Potter." He nodded several times. "My lips are sealed now. You'll just have to discover the book's wonders on your own."

Harry smiled and put the book aside. He was already getting a little weary of the gifts, though. *Honestly. No one needs this many.*

He frowned when he received Ignifer's present. It looked like a broad, flat rock, but it was copper-colored, and thin, and sharp on the edges. He took it up, gingerly, so that he didn't cut himself, and looked at her.

"It's a dragon scale," said Ignifer softly. "From a Peruvian Vipertooth. If you need my help, Potter, wave it in the air, and it'll ignite and let me find you anywhere in Britain."

Harry blinked. It was a more open declaration of alliance than any of his new allies had made so far, unless one counted their coming to these meetings at all as an absolute commitment, which Harry didn't. "I—thank you."

"You're welcome." Ignifer leaned forward, never looking away from him, her yellow eyes as proud as a hawk's. Harry experienced a dizzy moment as he gazed at her. She appeared a distant figure out of legend. Her looks bespoke *Light witch* so strongly that he found it hard to reconcile them with the aura of Dark magic that pulsed about her, even knowing the facts about her expulsion from her family as he did. "It's the least I can do, if you are also offering me a sense of belonging."

Harry nodded slowly. Whether it was because of her heritage or something else, Ignifer was offering him a true alliance. He was not about to disdain it.

"Thank you," he repeated, and then set the dragon scale down and turned to the gifts from his closer allies.

From the Bulstrodes, of course, came a book on the strategy Adalrico had been trying to teach him, and a book on taking proper care of oneself. Harry flashed a sheepish glance at Elfrida. For one moment, he saw fangs among her teeth. He wondered what

Millicent had been punished with if she didn't eat properly and go to bed on time.

Hawthorn gave him a silver frame. Harry swallowed when he saw what it contained: a wizarding photograph of Dragonsbane. Swaddled in black, of course, so that his face could not be seen, as Harry had always known him. A necromancer never showed his face to anyone but his spouse and children. Still, that Hawthorn would give this picture up in the first place to the one who had killed her husband...

Harry met her eyes solidly. "Thank you."

Hawthorn merely nodded. Harry had to look away as he set the photograph in a place of honor beside him.

Narcissa and Lucius's gift was a silver bracelet, carved with delicate letters. Harry couldn't make out what they spelled, though. He didn't even know if they were runes, or ordinary letters so entwined with vines and the like as to make them unreadable. He glanced at her with, he knew, a faint frown on his face.

Narcissa leaned forward and laid her hand over his. Her voice was low but clear. "As a wizarding child gets older, Harry, he should have some emblem of his becoming an adult, and more and more a representative of the family instead of just someone who shelters under its protection. This bracelet is that." She nodded to it. "We couldn't, of course, just adopt you into the Black or Malfoy families, but we *can* show how much you mean to us: one Black by birth, one Malfoy by birth, and now a mingled family of both bloods. Please consider yourself bound and entwined with both of us, not only with the Malfoys." She lowered her voice. "And, of course, if you ever do find yourself bound even more firmly, we would not object." She led Harry's gaze to the side, and he met Draco's.

Draco's face held an odd expression: hope, and determination, and caution. Harry swallowed, and couldn't look away for a long moment. When he could, his cheeks were burning. He suspected he was about to find himself pursued with more determination.

He examined the bracelet to distract himself, and found that he could make out the letters, now. They were the Malfoy and Black mottos, intertwined. He smiled at Narcissa, and clasped the bracelet around his right wrist. "Thank you. I accept."

Narcissa relaxed. Only then did Harry realize that she'd been nervous he might reject the bracelet.

Why? Just because I'm Potter by birth?

Harry shook his head briskly. He was his parents' son, yes, and in more ways than just by blood, but that didn't mean he would ever be heir to Lux Aeterna or anything else James or Lily Potter owned. He would have refused them if they were offered. He didn't see why he should want them.

He forced the emotions away from him by smiling at Draco. "Well, Draco, it's time for your gift."

The expression on Draco's face became tinged with faint panic, but he didn't try to stop Harry from summoning the large box to himself and opening it.

Harry felt his own face change as he stared at the small snake in the box. He swallowed. It was inevitable that he should, he thought defensively. Memories of Sylarana were brewing in his head. He half-wanted to shout at Draco for getting him another snake at all.

But he put his hand into the box and hissed a soft greeting. The snake raised his head, hissed back, and crawled onto his arm. Harry lifted him out, staring at him and trying to appreciate everything that Draco had done for him.

Harry had recognized his breed at once. He was an Omen snake, one of a species of serpents whose bodies could reflect the future, and who sometimes appeared as signals of the fulfillment of prophecies or signs of impending disaster or fortune. His scales were utterly smooth, the color of milk—until they caught the light. Then they brewed and stormed with silver and white and gold, and sometimes shone transparent. He was beautiful, his head slender and more pointed than Sylarana's had been, his eyes a pale, cloudless blue-green, like the sky during a particularly fine sunset.

And he was of the Light. Omen snakes had always been associated with it.

Harry stared at Draco across the top of the box, and Draco nodded back at him.

“I got him because I thought he would be a good companion for you, Harry,” he said. “When Omen snakes choose, they’re more friends than—than pets.” He coughed. “If he likes you. He might not.”

Harry looked back down at the snake. *A companion. And of the Light, and male.*

He really was trying to give me someone who could be a friend, and who would remind me as little of Sylarana as possible.

There was another way in which he didn’t remind Harry of Sylarana, Harry thought, as the snake yawned. He had no fangs. He was a constrictor, not a venomous biter.

Harry took a deep breath, and said in Parseltongue, “Hello. Do you like me? I’m not sure that you do.”

The snake cocked his head seriously to the side. *“I’m not sure yet, either,”* he said. *“But I think so. You speak, yes, but it would take more than that to win my affection. You hold me gently, and that matters more. And you smell shocky, but you keep going through the pain. That is worth a great deal. I think that I will stay with you at least a few days, and if you cannot be my friend, then we will part with no hard feelings.”* Shining like a ripple of living water, he climbed to Harry’s shoulder and curled the lower part of his body there, lifting his head to touch his tongue to Harry’s cheek. He was only about six inches right now, but he would grow, Harry knew, until he was at least as long as an adult wizard’s torso. *“I like the way you smell.”*

Harry swallowed. “Good,” he tried. “What is your name?”

“I do not have one,” said the snake placidly. *“But I would like one in the language wizards use for spells. I like that one. If I could choose any human language to speak, it would be that one.”*

Harry nodded, and watched the snake for a moment, trying to think of a suitable Latin name. The serpent had turned outward to watch the rest of his allies, who were sitting still. Harry wondered if any of them knew how to react. He thought not.

The snake twisted once more, his scales flashed, and the perfect name came to Harry.

“What about Argutus?” he said aloud. The word meant “clear,” and also “significant,” when applied to omens.

“I like that,” said the snake happily. *“I think I like you. But I must wait a while to make up my mind, and I mean no offense if I do not choose you for a companion. There are many people who are simply not suited to be friends to an Omen snake.”*

Harry had to close his eyes, then. Omen snakes formed no involuntary bonds. He had known that, once, but had forgotten; it was a long time since he’d read about magical serpents. Argutus would choose to be his or not of his own free will.

Draco has done this for me. And he knew exactly what he was doing.

Harry lifted his head and opened his eyes. Draco’s fear melted. Harry didn’t know exactly what his own face was showing, but he suspected it wasn’t half his emotions.

So he nerved himself, braced himself, and leaned forward to kiss Draco, gently, on the cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered into his ear, while Argutus grumbled and adjusted his perch, slithering down his left arm to coil about his wrist, and he heard a few of his allies buzzing. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“Enough for you to kiss me in public.” Draco’s eyes were brilliant when Harry sat back. “I think I do, Harry.”

Harry stared one more moment before he turned away. That gaze was just a bit too intimate, and made him feel like he was in freefall. He needed to move past this awkward, and potentially vulnerable, moment.

He graced the rest of the company with a smile. “Should I have the house elves bring in dessert?”

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

Interlude: More Than Yourself

July 31st, 1995

Dear Harry:

First of all, happy birthday. I would have written earlier, but I had no idea of what was happening in the outside world—one of the few disadvantages of living in the Seers' Sanctuary. The shadows they create around the building to protect themselves also slow and bewilder the owls, so that post takes forever to reach us. They have opened a path in the shadows for my owl to fly swiftly.

But you know all that. I am only trying to put off expressing my letter's real purpose.

Snape has written to me. He has invited me to return and testify against Dumbledore. A copy of the Daily Prophet has reached us now, and we know exactly what he was charged with.

He, and your parents. Harry, I am so sorry. I never suspected that James would be so faithless, even knowing what he did to put me in Azkaban. I had thought that a parent's love for his children would prevail over his bond with Lily.

I regret that I will never have the opportunity to set some of the rats I have an understanding with upon him, but perhaps it is better this way.

Understand please, Harry: I am returning. I know that Lily, James, and Dumbledore have inflicted damage on you that can never be repaired, but they have also hurt me. I will testify in Dumbledore's trial, and against your parents as to the effects of the abuse I witnessed. I know that the Aurors will hunt me, but I intend to give myself to the Ministry and insist on undergoing interrogation with Veritaserum. With all luck, I will be free by the time the trials come around.

It is time the truth be known. Again, Harry, I am sorry, in case you see this as a betrayal, but they have hurt more people than yourself.

There were some segments of wizarding culture, a few hundred years ago, who believed that fifteen was the age of adulthood, rather than seventeen, as we now think. I hope that it is so for you, that you are able to understand why I am doing this, even as you may taste the bitterness of age.

*Sincerely,
Peter Pettigrew.*

August 1st, 1995

Dear Peter:

I do understand the reasons that you are returning, and if I had thought about it at all, I might have assumed Snape would contact you. Thank you for writing and informing me, however.

I will do nothing to prevent or interfere in your testimony. How could I? You deserve justice. The abuses that my parents and Dumbledore inflicted on you are not ones that I could deny, nor do I wish to.

Since you have been so honest with me, I will be honest in return. Though you may have been able to guess it, since you know the person I used to be, I did not give my permission to Snape to file these charges, and I have not cooperated with him at all so far. I will not try to free my parents or Dumbledore, or prevent the trials from going forward. They do have some opportunity of doing good, in exposing those crimes perpetrated on you and other innocent victims, whatever the outcome may be of the crimes they are charged with against me.

However, I am going to testify on the way I see their abuse of me, which, as I am continually reminded, is very different from the way that others see it. I plan to argue for leniency in those charges I can affect. I have done enough research on child abuse to discover how often the punishment in such cases, if the Wizengamot finds the criminals guilty, is execution. My parents and Dumbledore might deserve death for what they have done to others—that is not for me to say—but it is the charges affecting me that could prove fatal to them. I plan to struggle with every breath in my body before I let the sentence of execution come down.

So long as they are still alive, they have the chance to change. They cannot do that if they are dead.

I understand you perfectly. I hope you will understand me, and not take this as a declaration of war on your principles. I am already embroiled in a struggle with someone who does.

*Sincerely,
Harry.*

August 2nd, 1995

Harry:

I believe that you still do not understand me. I will try to explain myself one more time.

I did what I did because I believed it was the right thing to do, and so that neither your parents nor Dumbledore could ever threaten you again. I did this to secure your future. I knew that you would hate me for it, and that you have reached out to me with your letters is more than I had any right to hope. But I do not intend to retract or drop the charges, no matter what you may say in the trial. And you should know that my testimony will directly oppose your own. Pettigrew, McGonagall, and the Malfoys, I have no doubt, will also testify on the side of the prosecution. That is not to mention all the others who may have something to say. Even if your parents and Dumbledore manage to call character witnesses, I expect them to be imprisoned, and perhaps stripped of their magic.

I have made my choice. You may hate me again before all is done, but I will continue my course. I regret only the pain that has come between us, and the necessity of having to do this at all. I do not regret the exposure of the abuse.

Severus Snape.

August 3rd, 1995

Dear Snape:

I understand you perfectly. You are the one who continues to misunderstand me.

I will do nothing to prevent your testimony, or anyone else's. I understand that people have a right to speak their minds. I am not trying to make you regret anything you do not. I understand that you have a right to your emotions.

What I will do is pursue my will. By my desire and by my will, I am doing what I feel must be done, what is most in accord with my own personal code of justice. There are places that my actions affect other people, where I cannot follow a certain course because it would crush the freedom of others. This is not one of them. If anything, I am striving to secure the lives of others.

I am telling the truth as I know it. Why is this so hard for you to grasp? Why do you think that my doing so will somehow silence you? I know it will not. And if you think me contemptuous, speaking in scorn—the only cause for scorn I have is that you still think of yourself in some position of authority that can control my actions.

Your legal guardianship over me is a formality only, preserved by Scrimgeour. I will not oppose it for now. But, so far as I am concerned, the only connection we currently have is that of two principled men on the opposite side of a debate of principles. I understand why you did what you did. That does not stop me from hating it. You understand why I am doing what I do. That does not stop you from thinking me wrong.

Kindly cease to think of me as an abused child who does not know what he is doing, or someone who is only trying to spare the lives of my parents and Dumbledore because of a misguided love of sacrifice. I would try to spare the life of anyone who was charged with potentially fatal crimes against me. I ripped apart and rebuilt my mind, and I can choose to forgive them, rather than being compelled to do so.

Peter wrote to me that this is larger than I am. Of course it is. And the world contains more than you and your perceptions, Snape. It always has, but that was never truer than it is now. Perhaps you should consider that. You may have given up your grudge against my father, but you are just as blind as you ever were.

Harry Potter.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eleven: Madam Shiverwood

“But we have to go with you.” Draco said that as if he were talking to someone legless, who had proposed standing up and walking before his artificial legs arrived.

“No, you don’t have to.” Harry smiled over Draco’s shoulder at Narcissa, who was waiting patiently for him on the other side of the library, and shut the book called *Dark Blades: Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Knives and Feared Would Cut You*. “I’m going with your mum to the Ministry, and I’m grateful that she decided to take me, but I have to go into the interrogation—“

“Questioning, Harry,” said Narcissa.

Harry shrugged. So far as he was concerned, it was an interrogation. “With Madam Shiverwood alone,” he told Draco. “Someone else there with me might either constrain what I’m going to say or make me tell more than I’m comfortable with.” He was quoting the letter the Ministry had sent him about his appointment with Madam Shiverwood yesterday, but the words sounded more natural when he said them, he thought. They should. He’d practiced them several times before he got up this morning, knowing Draco would object to their parting.

Draco folded his arms and tapped his foot. Harry waited patiently. He was confident he could talk Draco out of coming into the interrogation room with him. Narcissa was on his side, and that was always a good thing where handling her son was concerned.

Draco chose to object to something else, though. “I wish I could be there so that I know you’re saying as much as you should, Harry,” he said.

“Huh?” *Not my most eloquent moment*, Harry thought an instant later, but Draco seemed to ignore it entirely as he clasped Harry’s wrists and looked into his eyes. Argutus, coiled happily about Harry’s lower left arm, hissed as Draco squeezed him and slithered up towards his shoulder.

“Are you actually going to tell her about the abuse, Harry?” Draco asked. “Or only what you think she should know?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. *Is he going to suspect me just like Snape does?* “I’ll answer all the questions she asks me with the truth,” he said shortly. “I won’t lie. I made a promise to myself about that during my time in Godric’s Hollow.”

“But what if she doesn’t touch on one aspect of the abuse?” Draco asked.

“Then she doesn’t.”

“Harry—“

Harry shook his head, and drew his wrists gently but irresistibly out of Draco’s grip. “I really do appreciate that you’re concerned,” he said, aware that his voice didn’t sound like it. “But since this is a personal decision that I’m making, I wish you wouldn’t push it. There’s one point when you wouldn’t have pushed it,” he couldn’t help adding.

“Expect to be pushed more from now on,” Draco murmured.

Harry stared at him. Draco didn’t try to look to the side, and Harry caught a glimpse, for the first time, of just how much he’d changed in the past two months.

Damn. And double damn. He does think I won’t collapse at any moment now. So he’s going to shove. Get more of what he wants, and what he thinks would be good for me instead of just what I tell him I want.

“Harry?”

Harry shook his head and turned away from Draco, though he could feel his eyes on his back like a brand. “Coming, Mrs. Malfoy —“

“Narcissa.”

Harry smiled at her, and did his best to ignore the odd feeling of excitement that had overtaken him. When he met Madam Shiverwood, he would have to be as collected as possible. “Narcissa, then. I’m ready.”

“Ah, Mr. Potter. Please come in.”

Harry entered the office of the Head of Magical Family and Child Services, staring around. He hadn’t had much chance to notice the décor here when he and Snape came to meet James for the custody hearing. Then, he’d been mostly occupied with watching what Snape’s insanity potion did. Now, almost a year later, he could see the picture of a child on each wall, and the deliberately calm and soothing atmosphere of the office, and suspect that Madam Hellebore Shiverwood took her job very earnestly indeed.

And I don’t need to worry about that because I have nothing to worry about, he told himself firmly again. I’m going to tell the truth. All of it. I wouldn’t ever try to prevent my parents from being imprisoned or punished. I will try to show why I don’t think they deserve execution. That’s all.

And that was precisely why both Draco and Snape seemed to be angry at him.

Harry shook his shoulders and focused on Madam Shiverwood, who’d come from behind her desk with her hand held out to him. Harry shook it, concentrating on her face. Her eyes were direct, and full of sympathy.

There was another light in them too, though, one that made Harry tilt his head to the side. *She’s impatient with this? Does she think it’s as useless as I do, since my testimony at the trial should really work to establish my parents’ guilt or innocence?*

Thoughtfully, Harry took the chair in front of Madam Shiverwood’s desk, wondering how he could use this.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” said the witch, as she sat. “You know that the purpose of this session is to draw some basic facts about your abuse from you, and try to offer you some comfort with them.”

She examined him like an insect. Harry knew why, having read about this point of the interrogation in the books on child abuse in the Malfoy library. She would be watching to see if he flinched at the word “abuse,” or averted his eyes, or made any of the more subtle signs of discomfort.

Harry supposed he might have made one that he didn’t know about, but all those he *did* recognize, he had been ready to control, and he did. He simply nodded, his eyes wide and guileless. She had to see how fine he was with this, that his focus wasn’t on angrily resisting her questions and denying the abuse had ever happened. He was doing exactly what he thought was right, exactly what he had thought a few weeks ago most people would be happy with him for doing.

And yet, no one seems to be happy with me.

Harry snorted to himself as Madam Shiverwood scribbled something down. *That’s because my behavior wasn’t what they really wanted. Snape wants me to think the exact same way about this that he does. I don’t know what Draco wants, but maybe it’s the same thing.*

Well, they can’t have that. My thoughts are my own. It happened to me, as they keep reminding me, and that means that I’m allowed to have my own opinion of it.

Madam Shiverwood looked up at last and gave him a smile Harry couldn’t help thinking of as insincere. “Let’s start with your mother, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded.

“How long has her abuse of you continued?”

“From the time I was a year and a half old, until the year that my brother and I went to Hogwarts,” said Harry promptly. “That was 1991,” he added, when the witch muttered and dug through some of the notes on her desk. “Since then, there have been scattered incidents, but I only saw her over the summer and briefly for some holidays. She had no time to build up a sustained cycle of abuse.” *See? I’m using the word. I’m adult. I can face this.*

Madam Shiverwood clucked her tongue as she wrote that down. “And what would you say the most damaging part of her abuse was?”

Harry smiled in spite of himself, acknowledging a question he hadn’t been prepared for. “Training to be a sacrifice,” he said. “She said I was to die for my brother if necessary, to give him all the credit for achievements like winning Quidditch games even when I won them, to use my magic to protect and defend him and put him forward. When I managed to break out of that mindset with my brother, I found myself doing the same thing with other people.”

“The most damaging part was not the phoenix web, then?” Madam Shiverwood scowled at her notes. “Your guardian seemed to think it was.”

Harry frowned. “The phoenix web bound my magic, and tied my loyalty to my brother,” he said. “But the sacrificial training was deliberate. The phoenix web had many *consequences* which my mother and Dumbledore no more expected than you expect someone to break a leg when you push him down a hill.”

She glanced quickly up at him. “But the fact remains that they pushed you down the hill in the first place,” she said, voice soft.

“Yes. Well.” Harry shrugged and struggled to regain control of himself. Snape wasn’t even here. Harry had no reason to get angry at this stage of the game. “They did. But you asked me what I thought was most damaging, and not my guardian. And the sacrificial training was my answer.”

“How would you describe the other abuses you suffered?” Madam Shiverwood sat back and watched him, eyes sharp, but face gentle.

Not playing fair, Harry wanted to whine. This was another question he hadn’t expected. Questions about dates and specific incidents, yes, but not forcing him to fall back on wide consideration of his abuse.

But you can do this, because you’re strong.

Harry ignored the way his nose stung when he breathed through it, and walked forward. “Hard,” he said. “In my mother’s eyes, necessary, but now I realize that most of them were not so—“

“Only most of them?” Madam Shiverwood was on that like a mongoose on a cobra. “Why not all of them?”

Harry hunched his back. Argutus hissed sleepily at him from his shoulder. “*You smell as if you are in pain,*” he said. “*And you should not have come here alone, I think. When my kind are as young in the general span of our years as you are in yours, then we are always with our mother and our siblings. You need your sibling, since your mother is evil.*”

Harry found the soft words soothing. “It’s a human thing,” he said, and saw Madam Shiverwood’s eyes widen at his Parseltongue. “Sorry,” he added to her, and turned to focus on Argutus. “Not something I can help right now, that my sibling’s separated from me.”

“*Humans are clever sometimes, but marvelously stupid others,*” Argutus murmured, and, to Harry’s relief, went back to sleep.

“Is that something you do often?” Madam Shiverwood was rattled and trying not to show it, but her voice gave her away. “Speak to snakes?”

“When there’s a snake to be spoken to.” Harry owed her the truth on that, too.

Madam Shiverwood shook her head once or twice, and managed to gain control of herself, apparently. Then she returned to the question that Harry had hoped she would forget. “Why do you see only most of the abuses as unnecessary?”

“A slip of the tongue.” Harry shifted uneasily. “Of course all of them were things that she should not have done to me.”

“Forgive me, Harry,” the witch said, her voice now completely soft. “But in this kind of environment, such slips of the tongue are significant. Please tell me what you meant. Let me reverse the question, “ she added, before he could say anything. “What parts of your abuse would you describe as necessary?”

Harry lifted his head. He thought he might know for a moment how the stag felt, followed by hounds.

But then he reminded himself that he had other concerns than how pressed and harassed he felt by Madam Shiverwood’s questions. *Lives* rode on what he was doing. He forced his breathing back under control and smiled at her. Madam Shiverwood blinked.

Harry summoned the truth, fashioned it into words, and made them flow from his lips. “I suppose I think that some of the discipline was necessary,” he admitted. “Training me to resist torture, for example. If she hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have survived my experience with Voldemort this summer. I would certainly have snapped, or perhaps simply died from the shock.”

Madam Shiverwood flinched at the sound of the Dark Lord’s name, but said, “Just because it had good consequences doesn’t make it good. You know that, Harry, don’t you?”

“I do now, madam.” Harry thought of Godric’s Hollow, of how he’d used that insight to build up part of the skeleton of his mind.

“But you continue to think this part of the abuse was good? Was necessary?”

“I’m grateful that it happened,” said Harry. He could watch her face twist in pity, he told himself. It was not as hard as losing his hand, or kissing Draco in front of other people. “Not the same thing, perhaps. I know what would have happened to me if it wasn’t there. And I do prefer being abused to snapping permanently under Voldemort’s torture. With my magic, I would have done more damage to many more people.”

“Harry.” Madam Shiverwood’s voice was soft. She leaned across the desk to clasp his hand. “Please, listen to me. I want you to listen to me.”

Harry nodded. He’d expected this part, too.

“Your mother had no right to do what she did to you,” Madam Shiverwood whispered. “Even now, you’re using and building on the premises that she taught you to obey. It would have been *understandable* if you had snapped. You shouldn’t have had to cast pain curses on yourself just to insure you didn’t. And you are still thinking more about the damage others would have suffered than the damage you did.”

“For the first,” Harry said, floating a little iceberg of calmness on top of the sea of pain, and making sure only the calmness got access to his lips, “I do find it hard to regret. Perhaps that’s wrong, but it’s what I feel.”

“Nothing you feel is *wrong*, Harry,” Madam Shiverwood whispered.

But you think it is. Harry recognized the look in her eyes. She wanted to cure him of those kinds of thoughts, just as Snape did, just as Draco did. Harry preferred to keep the sanctity of his own mind intact. He’d had enough of other people meddling in it.

“As for the second,” Harry continued, “that’s part of my training that I never want to give up. I *do* care for others, Madam Shiverwood, yes. I know now that that does no good if I’m so weak or hurt that I can’t actually accomplish anything for them. I deprived myself of sleep to tutor others, and in the end that was useless, because I collapsed at the first pressure and missed their tutoring sessions.” Wincingly, he touched the memory of Hawthorn forcing him into a breakdown last year, and then putting him to bed. It still made him want to hide when he thought about it. He’d been stupid, and more, he’d acted like a child, and so been treated like one. “So I want to go on caring for others. I promise that I no longer believe, as my mother tried to train me to believe, that every little whim and pleasure of my brother, or anyone else, is more important than my own health.”

“And what about your own whims and pleasures?”

“Beg pardon?” Harry felt a bit dizzied. Madam Shiverwood wasn’t conducting this interrogation exactly like the sample ones in the Malfoy books, which wasn’t fair.

“How do you feel your own whims and pleasures compare to others’?” Madam Shiverwood simply watched him, never taking her hand from his. Now her fingers were stroking the back of it. Harry wriggled uncomfortably.

“I can tell you,” he said. “But you’re not going to like the truth.”

“Nevertheless, I wish to know it.”

Harry nodded. “The greatest pleasure I get is helping others,” he said. “That’s still true. It will always be true, I think. And if the things I want are only whims, then there’s really no sense in indulging them. But I am trying to get better. Really. I know now that there’s no *harm* to my wanting something, that it’s not selfish just because I’m the one doing the wanting. It’s putting it into action that gives me hives.”

Madam Shiverwood smiled at him. “That was a very honest answer, Harry,” she said. “I admit, when you came here, I felt—oddly disposed towards you. I thought, for some reason, that you would refuse to give me any information at all. But that’s disappeared from my mind like a fog in the morning. You’re being honest, and I appreciate it. It’s often very difficult for abused children to admit they’ve been abused at all.”

Harry nodded. He still objected to the “children” part of that description, but she had no need to know that.

“So we’ve taken the first step,” Madam Shiverwood continued comfortingly. “Now. I’d like you to do something for me between now and the time when I next see you again.”

Harry blinked. “We’re done? That’s it?” He had thought she would require more evidence from him on how much abuse his mother had inflicted.

“For now, we’re done,” said Madam Shiverwood with a nod, sitting back. Harry was relieved when she let his hand go. “The purpose of this session was to begin healing you, Harry. Sometimes a Healer is actually the best person for that, but mental and emotional abuse to the extent that you suffered are—well, different. They’re rarer than outright physical or sexual abuse in the wizarding community, and almost always accompany them, rather than stand alone.”

“My parents *never* touched me like that,” said Harry savagely.

“It’s all right,” Madam Shiverwood murmured. “I know they didn’t. But it does mean that I’m going to be helping you heal most of the time, Harry, rather than a Healer.”

Harry frowned at her. Somehow, he hadn’t expected this, though he thought he was prepared for everything. To give testimony on the abuse, yes. But why did she want to change the way he thought?

Because she thinks this kind of thinking is wrong. They all think that, he realized in resignation. Well, he would just have to keep showing them how much he had healed, how it no longer hurt him to tell the truth, until they believed it.

“I want you to try indulging at least a few whims and pleasures,” said Madam Shiverwood. “No more than one a day. But do that, Harry. Think of something you want, something ordinary and small, and fetch it. Or encounter a physically pleasant situation and try to enjoy it for its own sake, rather than as a pleasure for someone else or something to be endured.”

Harry concealed a groan. *Therapy. Great.* But he nodded obediently.

Madam Shiverwood smiled at him. “Thank you, Harry,” she said. “I’ve rarely seen such courage and such honesty. I look forward to speaking with you again.”

Harry hesitated as he stood, then decided he might as well ask. He wasn’t sure when he would meet with Madam Shiverwood again, and he couldn’t guess the answer from how this meeting had gone. “Madam?”

She glanced up at him from marking a piece of paper that looked like a list.

“Do you think that my parents and Dumbledore will be executed?”

Madam Shiverwood clucked her tongue. “Who told you that, child?”

“I learned that execution is a common punishment for child abuse,” said Harry impatiently. He was not a child, and it was unfortunate that he was giving her that impression, because it wasn’t how he really felt. He would have to work on that. “What do you think, madam?”

Madam Shiverwood sighed. “Your father was a good man, once,” she murmured. “A famous Auror. I had a bit of a crush on him myself. And your mother defied the Dark Lord at his side. And of course everyone knows Albus Dumbledore’s legend. I know it’s hard to credit that they could fall this far. But at this point, Mr. Potter? I really don’t know what the Wizengamot might do to them.”

With that, Harry had to be content, and he slipped out of the room to find Narcissa.

She wasn’t alone when Harry did find her. Harry paused and tried to recognize the woman who talked to her, matching her up with several potential pictures in his mind. He couldn’t make her fit any of them, though.

She had long golden hair, with a ripple of deeper gold in the middle, as though someone had held her head in a vat of molten metal. Her eyes were large, and so blue that Harry could see them from several feet away. She wore a gown rather than a robe, fringed with white lace. At her side stood a lean hound made of jewels, shifting and scratching itself with a tingle of magic and a jingle of sapphires.

Harry moved forward slowly, vaguely alarmed when it became clear that the witch was questioning Narcissa on his living with them, and Narcissa was explaining more about the specifics of the child abuse case—not much, just what had been in the newspapers already, but Harry had no idea why she was telling even that much.

The stranger noticed him first, and turned towards him with a fierce smile. Harry blinked. He had thought there was a fang in her mouth for a moment, as he would have expected to see in Elfrida’s, but wasn’t that impossible? A *puellaris* witch would not have approached a stranger the way this woman must have approached Narcissa, and she would have a husband somewhere close to her.

“Harry Potter,” said a voice that had obviously been trained to piercing softness, like Elfrida’s. Harry’s puzzlement grew as she clasped his hand. “My name is Laura Gloryflower.”

Harry had heard of the Gloryflowers, a Light pureblood family who often made magical animals out of materials like metal or jewels. They were responsible for the original creation of the voting owls that helped in the elections for Minister. That explained the hound, at least. It didn’t explain Laura’s unusual boldness.

Narcissa seemed to notice his floundering, and came to the rescue. “Harry, Mrs. Gloryflower was trained as a *puellaris* witch, but her husband died in the Dark Lord’s War,” she said. “She had to take over the family.”

Harry blinked, and tried to imagine what a witch who was forced to confront the world after hiding from it all her life might do. She might crumple. On the other hand, if she adapted and confronted it head on...

He swallowed at the thought of the ferocity that could entail.

“Why did you want to meet me, Mrs. Gloryflower?” he asked, hoping it was not for the reason that had just darted into his mind.

“Because you are a child, and you have suffered,” said Laura, dashing his hopes. “So I came to offer my help. I had no way to meet you, until I realized that of course you must come to the Ministry at some point and speak with Madam Shiverwood, as all abused children do. So I came here, and asked until I found someone willing to tell me the date and time.”

Harry bristled in spite of himself. “I thought they weren’t supposed to give that kind of information out.”

“Oh, they’re not,” said Laura. “But being pinned to the wall with a lioness breathing in one’s face tends to intimidate most people.” This time, her head flickered with the shadow of a cat’s head, and she looked immensely satisfied with herself.

I don’t think I like her, Harry thought. “Mrs. Gloryflower, I do appreciate your good intentions, but—“

“I also came to propose a formal alliance with you,” Laura continued. “My family was allied to Albus Dumbledore, but he is a

disgusting wizard whom I want nothing to do with again.” She said “disgusting” in the tone that other witches might have used for much stronger adjectives. “Therefore, we would like to follow you.”

Harry set his feet as best he could. He didn’t want her help if it was only based on his being an abused child. “Are you sure that this won’t split your family, Mrs. Gloryflower? The only other Light pureblood family with ties to Dumbledore that I’m aware of, the Starrises, are sharply divided on the issue of allying with me.” “Sharply divided” was a bit of an understatement, from what Tybalt had told Harry about his uncle Augustus.

“Oh, no,” said Laura, sounding quite sure. “They do what I tell them to.”

I bet they do, Harry thought uneasily.

“I suppose I don’t understand what basis you have for thinking I’d be any better,” he said bluntly. “So, yes, your training might tell you to protect me, but there are plenty of other abused children you could protect. And I have more Dark allies than Light ones right now. You must know that. So why do you think you should fit in?”

“Harry,” Narcissa chided him.

“Sometimes, you are rude,” said Argutus. *“I can tell that you’re being rude from the way you smell.”*

“Because I want to,” said Laura. “Part of it is to do with family honor. We followed Dumbledore for so long that I can’t help feeling we’re tainted by the association with him. Part of it is wanting to be a part of the wizarding world’s future. My family has never *led*, as such, but we’ve always been there—sometimes as lieutenants, sometimes as supporters, but there. We recognize change and we accept its inevitability. I’m also capable of studying evidence, and I don’t think I’m stupid. You may have stronger Dark than Light associations, but that doesn’t make you either. You haven’t Declared for Dark. That, to me, says that you will welcome Light allies, and won’t use them for puppets.” Laura cocked her head, and Harry had the feeling she had flattened her ears and lashed her tail, too, never mind that she currently didn’t have ears or a tail. “So. Here I am.”

Harry blinked again. Not even Ignifer had been this direct.

Well, it might have something to do with her being Light, and not invested in twisting every tiny meaning out of every word she can, he thought at last. Laura went on looking at him expectantly, and Harry nodded. “If you think that you can accept the terms of formal alliance—“

“Oh, a formal family alliance? No,” said Laura, decisively. “I don’t want to swear never to hurt a member of your family. I don’t think it’s a good idea. If one of them fights you, the Gloryflowers have to be able to protect you. And if one of my family *did* turn against you, though they’d be idiots to do it, I would want you to be able to hurt them back. So. A different kind of alliance. I was thinking an Unbreakable Vow. Shall we have your adopted mother serve as a Bonder?”

“I don’t like Unbreakable Vows,” said Harry, determined to have some control over the developing alliance.

Laura nodded cheerfully. “Then I’ll write you at some point in the future, and arrange things to both our satisfaction.” She smiled at Narcissa. “Mrs. Malfoy has been kind enough to invite me to the Manor with the rest of your allies, pending your approval of our joining you, and at that point, we’ll ally in front of everyone. I think everything should be done as much in the open as possible. I’m not good at deception or subterfuge. Gloryflowers leave that up to other people. I’ll see you then, with your approval, Mr. Potter?” She paused.

Harry studied her face. He would be a fool to reject what seemed to be a sincere alliance merely because he didn’t like the family matriarch thinking of him as a child. Unwillingly, he nodded.

“Good.” Laura stooped and kissed him on the cheek before he could protest, pausing and smiling when she saw Argutus. “An Omen snake,” she said. “Now I think this alliance even more favorable than I did before.”

She swept away, the jeweled hound padding at her side. Harry stared after her.

“Talking to her makes me tired,” Narcissa admitted after a moment of silence. “Laura Gloryflower is—a force.”

“I don’t see how a *puellaris* witch can do that,” said Harry, and knew he sounded plaintive.

“She thinks of the whole world as her children.” Narcissa shrugged. “But if one child wrongs another, she takes the part of the wronged child.” She caught a glimpse of his expression, and smiled at him. “Don’t worry, Harry. It is not unique to you.”

Harry didn’t respond. He had caught a glimpse of someone coming up the hall behind Narcissa, and it seemed as though every muscle in his body had stiffened. He could feel his face tensing up, his mouth working into a snarl.

Snape halted a few feet down the corridor and watched in silence.

Harry moved his jaw enough to knock loose a few words, at last. “What are *you* doing here?”

“As your guardian,” said Snape, his voice quiet, “they told me when Madam Shiverwood would interview you.” He studied Harry, and Harry could almost feel the words that he longed to speak, bubbling between them. But those would only be more of the words that had existed in the letters, and thus useless to say.

Harry struggled against the growing pressure of his rage, Argutus hissing in displeasure as the air around him chilled. He shouldn’t hate what Snape had done this much. If he could forgive his parents, why not Snape? He should just reconcile with him, distantly and coldly, and go on his way. He could hold his tongue in more trying circumstances. He had no reason to speak now.

But two things made what Snape had done unforgivable to Harry: he had hurt *other people*, and, specifically, had filed charges that endangered other people’s lives. Harry could understand Dumbledore and his parents being brought to trial on non-fatal charges. That they might be executed was unthinkable.

And, as much as he hated to admit it, the second reason was rooted in his own love for Snape. He could forgive his parents and Dumbledore because they didn’t matter that much to him. But for someone he so valued to do this, to threaten other people with death in a situation other than battle, and refuse to understand why Harry might want to let them live...

Harry only realized he had lost the fight against his emotions a moment after he began to speak.

“*Why* do you keep thinking I’m going to change my mind? I’m *not*. Yes, they might go to prison, but they can’t *die*. And I didn’t even know that they might until I started investigating the trial procedures. You must have known from the beginning. Yet you condemned them anyway, with charges that you knew would lead to their deaths and their long slow suffering in public beforehand. *Why?*”

Snape’s face, which had been haggard and pale, tightened. “Because they must be stopped,” he said. “Not merely given a slap on the wrist. And a slap on the wrist is all you would have given them, Harry.”

“*Not true.*” The words felt dragged up from the depths of his throat. “I could have stopped them.”

“Not this way. Not permanently.” Snape took a step forward, cocking his head. “And that’s the difference between us, Harry. You try to give an equal measure of protection to both victims and offenders, and when their crimes are against you, you would forgive them completely. I will not see that happen. I will insure that you have as much justice as anyone else would.”

Harry shook his head and turned away. He had regained control of himself. He should not have started speaking in the first place, he thought. He knew what Snape believed. There were no surprises to be had here.

“I’d like to go back to the Manor now, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said.

Narcissa hesitated for a long moment, but then seemed to come to a decision. “Severus,” she said, with a little bow of her head, and then escorted Harry down the hall, a hand on his shoulder.

Harry bowed his head and tried to tell himself that he didn’t feel anything at all.

“*You smell of pain,*” said Argutus. “*Do you do that often? And do you smell as often of determination to endure the pain?*”

Snape leaned on the wall, his eyes tracking Harry’s movements. He had not realized what a shock it would be to him, to see Harry walking about without the glamour of his left hand, and, seemingly, a few inches taller than he had been when he left Hogwarts. Harry’s eyes were clear and determined, and even his voice, choked with rage, had been stronger than Snape expected it to be.

His words should have struck home. They should have hurt.

They did not. Not particularly.

His last letter had made Snape come as close as he could to thinking that what he had done was wrong. It rang with steely conviction that Harry would triumph, and made him seem driven entirely by principles, as if he had let all emotion about the case drop by the wayside.

Seeing Harry in person told a different story. He had needed his parents and Dumbledore brought to justice, whether or not he would acknowledge it. Snape had observed him in silence for a few moments before he approached, and seen how easy it was for Laura Gloryflower to overwhelm him. He had been dazed from his interview with Madam Shiverwood. He was well on the road to healing, it seemed, but not there yet.

No matter what he thinks.

And he had let himself slip into an argument with Snape instead of ignoring him completely. That alone said that Snape was important enough to him that he couldn't debate rationally.

I still matter to him. This is not entirely a debate of principles.

Snape folded the hope up, put it in his pocket, and returned to Hogwarts a good deal more cheerful than he had felt for the last month.

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

Chapter Twelve: A Sound of Many Voices

Harry dreamed.

This time, he didn't have the odd cloudiness that had marked his vision of the attack on the Burrow. Harry found himself rather grateful for that as he crouched in his lynx shape on the floor of a cave he hadn't yet seen, and watched Bellatrix carving wood in front of him. She did it mostly with magic, but now and then she would slice a knife across a piece of wood. Harry didn't try to see what she was making. Instead, he turned and faced Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was speaking with someone else, whom Harry couldn't see until he shifted a bit to the side. Fenrir Greyback crouched in front of Voldemort, his head bowed and his long shaggy hair hanging over his face. He was saying, "...don't think that most of them will have any objection, my lord."

"Excellent." Harry wondered how the sibilance that had never troubled him in the voices of Argutus, Sylarana, or the Many could sound so ugly in Voldemort's. "Then travel to your kindred, Fenrir. Summon them to me when the moon grows full again."

Greyback bowed his head once more, and then turned and slipped towards the entrance of the cave. Harry saw a stir of motion where the dimness gave way to light. He suspected it was Cynthia Whitecheek, Greyback's consort and a new Death Eater, who had devoured a small boy in the graveyard while Harry watched.

He shuddered at the reminder, and crept into the shadows as Voldemort turned to Bellatrix. He didn't think that his enemy could sense him, or he would have attacked Harry by now, but he didn't know how these visions might have changed since Voldemort's resurrection, and he was in no mood for a head-on confrontation.

"Bella." Voldemort hissed her name, too, though with no sibilants in it, that didn't seem possible. "How goes your carving?"

"Almost finished, my lord," said Bellatrix, and went on chanting in a language that Harry didn't think was Latin. Voldemort watched her for some time, reaching out absently to stroke the head of the queen basilisk, who had slithered up beside him. Harry crouched further at the sight of her, but the snake didn't turn around. She merely coiled lazily at her master's feet and let the set of false eyelids that kept her gaze from killing fall over her eyes.

"Done, my lord," said Bellatrix abruptly.

Voldemort released a harsh laugh, and put out one white hand to take the collection of wooden circles that Bellatrix handed him. Harry squinted, but couldn't make out much about them. They were small, perhaps the size of Sickles, and they had elaborate carvings; that much he was sure of. But when he shifted to the side, Voldemort had scooped them so close to his chest that his fingers and robes entirely concealed them. Harry uttered a little growl, then remembered the basilisk and froze. She still didn't turn towards him, though.

"What should I tell them, my lord?" Bellatrix stood, her single hand, the one she had stolen from Harry, brushing at her robes. Her full attention was on Voldemort's face, despite the presence of a dark hole at her back Harry thought he saw the darkness in the hole ripple, and shivered.

"That we come up from beneath on the autumnal equinox," Voldemort whispered, never looking away from the wooden circles in his hand. "That my breeding of basilisks proceeds apace, and they may count on their help if they have trouble. That we will strike at the Muggles where they least expect it." He choked out a high, cold laugh that Harry had not missed at all, though it had been some time since he had last heard it. "Go, Bellatrix. This is the greatest plan of Lord Voldemort since his rising!"

"My lord," Bellatrix murmured, and strode around the brink of the hole, moving out of range of Harry's vision.

Voldemort laid the wooden circles on the ground, and Harry promptly inched forward to get a glimpse of the design on them. To his disappointment, it was nothing recognizable, only a tangled network of lines. Yes, they *might* mean something, but so might almost any random tracing if looked at with the right eyes.

Voldemort laughed, then, and touched the neck of the basilisk at his feet. "Come," he said in Parseltongue, and she lifted her head and gazed up at him with uttermost devotion. Harry winced. Of course, the Dark Lord must have told his pet not to hurt him, either. "I will breed you a mate."

He turned away. Harry debated staying and witnessing the birth of this second basilisk, but he doubted that it would add anything to what he already knew. He had much more important information to provide to his allies: what sounded like notice of a major attack, and on the day when, of course, the balance between light and darkness would shift toward darkness—the day last year when Voldemort had yanked Regulus out of his head.

He pushed against the barriers of the dream until they split, this time becoming almost like the clouds of the last vision, and then tumbled back into his body.

Narcissa never had restricted his getting up early, and Harry had risen before the sun did and spent nearly half an hour pacing his bedroom. Both the pain and the amount of blood from his scar had been small, so he could concentrate on what "up from beneath" might mean.

Tunnels. Well, yes, tunnels, that's obvious, but where? I don't think there are that many tunnels under Hogwarts. Harry sighed, longing for a moment for the Marauder's Map, which he had not seen since Voldemort in Sirius's body had stolen it, along with his other maps, at the end of third year. *But maybe I'm misremembering. And where would he want to attack but Hogwarts?*

Then Harry halted, and drummed a hand against his forehead hard enough to make himself stagger.

He talked about Muggles, Harry, not wizards. He's going to attack Muggles. And the basilisks would certainly fit, since they could slither through tunnels and squeeze out of unexpected places. Isn't there a system of tunnels under London? At least, I think there is. Harry had to admit that he wasn't that conversant with most aspects of the Muggle world, but he was sure that he had heard his mother mention the "London Underground" once or twice. He bit his lip, wondering who would be the best person to ask for advice on that.

As if one insight had sparked another, it didn't take him nearly as long to come to the right conclusion this time. Griselda Marchbanks knows the southern goblins, and they know the tunnels under some parts of London, at least. They could probably figure out what portions connect to the Muggle ones and which would be in most danger. I'll write a letter to Madam Marchbanks immediately.

Harry did that, describing his reasons for believing that Voldemort was coming through the Underground. He hesitated for a long moment over letting Madam Marchbanks know about his visions, but in the end, he decided there was no other way to go about it. She wouldn't trust the word of Evan Rosier, not hardly, and it was absolutely imperative that Voldemort's attack on the Muggles

be prevented. At least they had almost two months to prepare for it.

When the letter was complete, Harry hesitated again, and then called for Fawkes. The phoenix appeared with a soft warble of complaint, and ostentatiously checked his shoulders, head tilted to the side as he hovered.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Argutus is still asleep in the bed, Fawkes,” he said. “And he’s never bothered you, anyway.” He found it odd that the phoenix, by so much the older and wiser of the two creatures, was the one who was having more trouble adapting to the situation.

Fawkes flicked out a trill that Harry knew meant basically the same thing as, “Hmmmph!” but settled on the bedside table and let Harry attach the letter to his leg. He vanished in a tiny ball of flames the moment Harry told him that the letter was destined for Madam Marchbanks.

“Why are you over there?”

Harry went back to the bed, and extended his right arm down for Argutus. The Omen snake, resting in the warmth of the depression he’d created in the bed, only looked back at him. His eyes shone with calmness. Harry could not decide if it came from natural serenity or a lack of knowledge about the world.

A moment later, he realized why Argutus wasn’t moving, and put his left arm down. Argutus coiled happily about his left wrist, and Harry turned towards the door.

“You never answered me about why you were over there,” said Argutus, looping a coil of his body around Harry’s throat so that he could stay on for the ride.

“Attending to Fawkes,” Harry said as he trotted down the stairs, wondering who he should speak to first. *Narcissa*, he decided. From the quiet in the downstairs rooms, Draco was still asleep, and Lucius would have next to no say in the decisions Harry now wanted made. Narcissa was the natural contact person for the rest of his allies, too. Even Laura Gloryflower had spoken first to her. “He doesn’t want to come and sleep in the bed anymore, now that you’re there.”

“I would not eat him. He is too big. Can I have crickets for breakfast?”

Harry ignored the question as he opened the door to the morning parlor and found Narcissa there. She put down the *Daily Prophet* she was reading and stood at once, her face pale but courteous. “Harry. Has something happened?”

“I’ve just had another vision,” said Harry. He told the details to her, as neatly and sparingly as he had related them in the letter to Madam Marchbanks. He didn’t want Narcissa fussing over this, especially because he was about to ask her for a favor.

Narcissa smiled slightly. “A good thing that I was planning to send letters to most of your allies today anyway, reminding them of certain obligations they are committed to,” she murmured. “And what else do you want me to do, Harry?”

Harry blinked. “Is it that obvious?”

“Written all over your face.”

Harry nodded, deciding that he would worry about it later. “We should visit Grimmauld Place. Anything else there that’s a weapon, or even useful knowledge, should be gathered up, and we should start preparing the house as a base. I know that we said we’d do that, but we haven’t so far.”

“You know why, Harry,” said Narcissa, in a motherly way. “You’ve been—indisposed, and there were other things to worry about. I still don’t think that going outside the wards is safe for you.”

“I’m going to ask Regulus to lower the wards on Number Twelve for us, so that we can Apparate directly to the house,” said Harry. “Then we’ll be inside the wards there, and we should be able to get back here before anyone else notices us, don’t you think?” Regulus hadn’t been in his head much lately—the closer McGonagall got to re-Transfiguring his body, the more time Regulus found himself obliged to spend in the little wooden dog—but Harry reached out for him now. *Regulus?*

There was a long moment of silence, and then Regulus answered, voice weary. *Yes, Harry?*

Would you lower the wards around Grimmauld Place for us? Voldemort is preparing for his first major strike in this war, I think, and we need all the weapons and knowledge we can get.

Regulus took another long moment to answer, but his tone was warmer when he did. *Of course, Harry. It's done. It might not take that bitch Bellatrix long to notice, though, so please go quickly.*

Of course. Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Narcissa. "The wards are down. Can we please go?"

Narcissa frowned and tapped her wand against her palm. Harry could see her weighing the risks in her mind.

"Why couldn't I go there alone?" she asked, as Harry had expected she would.

"I can strengthen the house with my own magic," Harry said calmly. "There's one particular technique I used to ward my parents' old house at Godric's Hollow when I was there that would work especially well. And, of course, I might see something valuable that you don't recognize, even though you're of the Black bloodline. I've had training in that kind of thing."

Narcissa considered some more. Harry sat on his impatience, and put it behind steel bars. Yes, he wanted to go quickly, so as not to risk Bellatrix getting in, but Bellatrix was busy informing Voldemort's allies of his plan, and at least this waiting would have better consequences than some of the hasty actions he'd come up with last year. He was being an adult, and mature, and responsible, in consulting his allies. He knew he was.

At last, Narcissa nodded. "Let me send the letters, and then I will accompany you, Harry," she said.

"Excellent," Harry said, and couldn't stop his satisfied smile, nor the foot he tapped on the floor until Narcissa was finished. He did somewhat soothe his impatience by answering Argutus's questions about owls, and the rustling things humans attached to them, and why people would eat things other than crickets for breakfast.

Harry heard the song the moment he entered the house at Grimmauld Place. This time, it even overrode the surprisingly cordial greetings of the portrait of Capella Black in his ears.

Let me free. Let me go. I am meant to be free. We are meant to be free, in the manner of other creatures that you have loosed. Wake me, vates. Wake us, unbinder.

Harry was halfway up the stairs before he realized what was happening. Narcissa's hand came down on his shoulder, and then she cast a spell that Harry didn't recognize, but which made the song cease. He realized after a moment that she hadn't cast a spell to end the song, which might be impossible, but to muffle all sound from reaching his ears.

Narcissa lifted a brow and traced glowing red letters in the air with a wand. *I am sorry to do this, Harry, but after how close that creature came to snaring you last time, I think it better to take no chances.*

Harry nodded shakily. The creature trapped upstairs at Grimmauld Place was unique in his experience—something that fed only on the magic of powerful wizards, and which only an average one was able to bind or contain. Its song was the subtlest form of compulsion he had ever encountered, far stronger than Dumbledore's. Even when he thought he was free from it, it twined about his mind in silver strands and dragged his thoughts to its own purpose. The only things Harry knew about it other than that were the location of the door it was trapped behind and the sound of many legs scrambling together that he'd heard when he ventured to that door last time they were in the house.

He found it hard to ignore a magical creature's appeal to him in the name of vates, but he knew the consequences of unleashing that creature would be neither moral nor ethical. Besides, Narcissa was keeping a close eye on him, and had already traced the words *I'll take the higher floors* in the air.

Harry nodded sheepishly, and waited until she was up the stairs before he closed his eyes. Last time, he had come to Grimmauld Place specifically to look for Regulus. With him found now, Harry had a compelling motivation to look in *other* ways.

He could sense other people's magic, when he grew sufficiently familiar with them; he knew some of the characteristics of Draco's power, and Snape's, and James's and Connor's power had caused him fits last summer when he found it pressing on him in Lux Aeterna, leaving him unable to concentrate. Now, for the first time, he relaxed and tried to sense any trace of weaknesses

in the wards of Grimmauld Place, or any unusually powerful magic. Perhaps it would lead him to something that Narcissa had overlooked, or something hidden in a place she'd never known about. Technically speaking, though Narcissa was of the Black line, she wouldn't be its heir unless both Regulus and Bellatrix died.

He gasped when he felt an old, odd echo of a familiar presence almost at once, dark and foreboding. And then it changed, and turned gray in his mind, overlaid with melancholy so strong that tears were burning his eyes when he opened them.

Harry let out a breath, and went slowly towards the kitchen. The portrait of Capella Black was probably still murmuring greetings and welcome. Harry didn't care. He walked through the kitchen as if he were dreaming, and then reached out and laid his hand on a portion of the wall that looked no different from all the rest.

A ward sparked softly at him. Harry hesitated, and wondered what he would have to do to get through it.

But even as he waited, the ward stopped sparking. Harry looked down to see a snake of light coiling around his hand. The silver tongue flickered out, touched the back of his wrist once, and then vanished, along with the rest of the serpent. Harry shivered, wondering which one of the mingled presences here had left the ward, and which the snake had recognized him as tied to.

The wall folded neatly out in a panel. Inside was a space about the size of a cupboard. Harry's chest tightened when he saw the familiar sheaf of paper on the top shelf, and he reached out and clasped it.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he said.

Nothing happened. Harry snorted, then reached into his pocket, levitating the map in the air, and drew out his wand. A touch of the wand and a whisper of the words worked, and he watched the familiar lines of the Marauder's Map race across the parchment. His chest ached fiercely for a moment. Voldemort, in Sirius's body, must have come here just after he'd stolen the maps and hidden them in a place he had reason to believe only he would have access to. Or perhaps he had sent Kreacher, the Blacks' old house elf, to bring them here.

For a moment, even though he knew he shouldn't feel it, a surge of fierce satisfaction coiled in Harry's heart. He'd destroyed Kreacher in the confrontation with Voldemort at the end of his third year, and he could not feel that bad about the death. It had been a just return for the danger the elf had caused both him and Draco during the year, and might have gone on causing them if he'd lived.

He looked up from the Marauder's Map, at the second shelf of the hidden cupboard. A Pensieve sat there, and Harry's chest tightened for a different reason this time. He'd had some bad experiences with Pensieves in the past. And considering who had last touched this cupboard, he wondered about whose memories this one might hold.

Inevitably, of course, he had to reach out, draw the Pensieve forth into the light, and carry it over to set on the kitchen table. It was brimful of silvery thoughts. Harry hesitated for a long moment before he lowered his head and plunged it into the liquid.

Almost at once he found himself in a dim place. He looked around, and, with a little shock, recognized the meadow at Godric's Hollow. His younger self was sprawled with a large book in one corner of the lawn, of course, and Connor and James were flying a kite in another. It was a scene Harry had seen several times in his own memories. But he knew it happened on a sunny day. A Pensieve memory, even filtered through Sirius's perspective, should have retained that light. Instead, it looked as though a murky gray mist had covered everything.

He understood after a moment's consideration, and after turning and seeing Sirius behind him, gaze desperate and haunted. This was the way things had really looked on that particular day; it was his own memory that was false. The presence of Voldemort was in the back of Sirius's mind even then, though not the same piece of it that had controlled him just before his death. Evil magic slithered under the wards and tainted the air with its slime. And under Sirius's thoughts were the pained screams of Regulus. He had lived with his brother's torture in his head for twelve years. Everyone else, of course, thinking Regulus dead, had believed those were only nightmares.

Harry pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and closed his eyes. A surge of pity and renewed grief for his godfather touched him. Sirius had betrayed his friends and Connor and Harry near the end, but that was after more than a decade of fighting against Voldemort's mental pressures, suffering torture secondhand, and suffering from the guilt that sending Peter to Azkaban and claiming his brother was dead had caused. That he had broken only then, and kept on fighting to the point that Voldemort had to fight back to claim his mind, bespoke enormous strength. His greatest faults had been the pride and the guilt that wouldn't let him tell anyone the truth, not weakness.

Harry gently levitated the Pensieve into the air, and floated it behind him, along with the Marauder's Map, as he went towards the front door. He could sense the weaknesses in the wards more easily if he were just outside the house's magic, he thought.

I'm not going to forget you, Sirius, he thought, even as he worked to link Protego charms together and hang them around the house. What happened to you should never have to happen to anyone. Thank you for reminding me of part of the reason that I'm fighting Voldemort. And I'll look through the memories in the Pensieve, too, when I can bear to. Your life shouldn't go unshared any more.

Despite the tears he'd shed earlier, Harry felt stronger and more centered than he had since the interview with Madam Shiverwood. There was ground he was still uncertain on and must trip over when he walked—the ground of his healing was one patch, where every step he took seemed to be wrong, and to require ten more—but with defensive magic and what he was most committed to, he could dance.

Harry returned to Malfoy Manor a little more hopeful than when he'd left it. He'd almost completely re-warded the house at Grimmauld Place, with some lines of defense that were keyed specifically to him and would yield otherwise only to Regulus—since he was the Blacks' heir, nothing Harry could do to the property would ultimately override his will. Narcissa had found a few more objects that might be weapons, and several books hidden in the walls. The song of the creature had not bothered him again. All in all, Harry thought, they might manage to launch this war on firm footing after all.

Then he entered his room, and saw Draco waiting with a set face, and saw the pile of letters on the table next to his bed. Harry hesitated, glanced at Draco, and waited.

Draco said nothing, simply stared at him. Harry decided to deal with the letters first. He picked up the first one and turned his back to Draco, frowning at the handwriting on the envelope. It looked familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen it. Likewise, the letter at first afforded him no clues.

August 7th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I'm sorry that it took me so long to write you. I had no idea what to say. And then I realized that was stupid, because this is a letter to you and not a three-foot essay for Professor Snape, so I sat down and just started writing.

I mean—it's not that I don't think you're important. Of course I do. But I think you'll still forgive me if I say something stupid or wrong.

I'm so sorry for what you suffered at the hands of your parents. I really should have seen the signs of it, but I didn't. If you want books about it, just ask me, and I'll be happy to owl them to you. And of course I'll be happy to bring you books about it when we come back to school, too. I saw the announcement in the Prophet yesterday that the trial wouldn't be until the sixteenth of November. It'll feel like forever, I know.

And there I am, making pompous declarations again. I'm sorry. This is the kind of thing that comes out when I try to write a spontaneous, emotional letter.

I especially want to apologize for believing in Professor Dumbledore so much. I thought he must be wonderful, since he was in so many books and he had such an enlightened attitude about Muggleborns like me. But then I heard what he did, and...just because you have enlightened attitudes doesn't make you a good person. I'm so sorry, Harry. I hope you can forgive me for believing in him like I did.

I don't know how to end this, so I'm just ending it.

*Sincerely,
Hermione Granger.*

Harry closed his eyes. He didn't have any suspicions of Hermione, that she was only saying this to make herself look good or somehow get into his good opinion, or that she had some stake in making him admit that he'd been abused. That made her

different from everyone else who'd tried to interview or write him. She deserved a careful, thought-out response that he would make later. He set her letter gently aside, and opened the next one.

This one had an actual seal on it, one bearing a cup in yellow wax. Harry frowned when he saw it, and again when he saw the handwriting—only vaguely familiar, though who was writing it became clear sooner.

August 6th, 1995

To Harry Potter, elder son and by all rights heir of the Potter family, balancer between Light and Dark, from Zacharias Smith, heir of the Smith line, last descendants of Helga Hufflepuff, Declared for Light.

I am writing to express my formal sympathies for your abuse, and for the current undignified way it is being played out in the papers. If there is anything I can do for one who has emerged from such tainted heritage so nobly shining, do not hesitate to let me know.

My Declaration for Light was a month ago, as I turned fifteen at that time, and my family holds to the older view of wizarding adulthood. As heir of my family, I have access to a good deal of money, and some small political capital that I intend to increase. For what good it might do, I am also Helga Hufflepuff's heir. All of this, or any other form of aid that you desire, may be asked for.

*Sincerely,
Zacharias Smith.*

Harry blinked as he laid that letter down, and only partly at Smith's pomposity. He had heard, years ago, of a witch named Hepzibah Smith who was Hufflepuff's heir—the last formally acknowledged as such, since the cup that was the last of Hufflepuff's heirlooms vanished after her death. Harry didn't know if being a Founder's heir carried any weight now, but at least he had it on his side if it did.

He had to admit that Zacharias's offer of monetary aid was even more tempting. Harry had no idea of what he was going to do for money if he exceeded the small store of Galleons that James had left for him in a personal vault at Gringotts. He wasn't the officially acknowledged Potter heir, no matter what Zacharias said, and so he had access neither to the main Potter vault nor any money that might be at Lux Aeterna. He would have to use his Galleons on his books and robes and other supplies for this year. At least Lily and James had paid for both he and Connor to attend Hogwarts in advance.

The last letter had handwriting that was very familiar, but not writing that Harry had ever expected to see again. His heart began to pound crazily as he read it.

Potter:

Please, please help me. Dad's gone crazy since the Dark Lord returned. He wants me to kill for him, and I don't want to. This note is dangerous, and I don't care. It's the first chance I've had to write all summer. Next year he wants me to attend Durmstrang, and then I'll be out of reach from you.

Please, help me somehow.

Vincent Crabbe.

Harry didn't stop to think, with this one. He drew out a sheet of parchment from his bedside table and scribbled as fast as he could, to try and keep up with his racing thoughts.

Dear Vince:

Hi. I was worried about you. I haven't heard from you in so long. How have you been?

I've been kind of bored this summer, with only Draco to talk to. I'd like to see the other Slytherin students, too, like you and Blaise. Could you meet me in Diagon Alley on the fourteenth of August? That's the day I'm going shopping for school supplies. I should be there between ten and eleven in the morning, and I'll probably stay for several hours. I'd love to talk with you.

Hope to see you soon,

Harry.

Harry folded the note and carried it over to Hedwig's perch, which was in the corner of his room nearest the window. She sat up and ruffled her feathers as she saw him, obviously noting the urgency of his stride.

"Carry this for me, girl," Harry murmured, levitating the twine that he needed to bind the letter firmly on without a second thought. "It needs to go to Vincent Crabbe, and it needs to go as soon as possible. Wait for a reply."

Hedwig gave an important hoot, and then swooped out. Harry clenched his hand and watched her dwindle in the sky, hoping against hope that Vince would understand his words. Harry didn't think it likely that a letter from Harry Potter would escape detection by Mr. Crabbe, and, in fact, he didn't want it to. The whole point was to let him know that Harry Potter was going to be in Diagon Alley on the morning of the fourteenth of August, and that he would be looking to meet his son there.

Harry had to get Vince close to him to help him, and he thought this was the best way to do so. Yes, he was using himself as bait in a trap, but it wasn't going to be a sacrifice. If everything went well, no one would even be wounded. Yes, Crabbe *might* pass the letter, and thus the privilege of killing Harry, on to someone else, but whoever else came would still have to escort Vince, to allay suspicion, and no one else would do that like his own father. If Harry didn't see Vince at all, Mr. Crabbe would think, he would have no problem simply Apparating out if someone tried to kill him. All that speculation rode on Vince's letter having escaped his father's detection, but then, so did Vince's plea for help.

Harry considered the risk that he might have to deal with multiple Death Eaters. He accepted it. Vince's situation was currently several degrees more desperate than his own, especially since Harry had no idea where the Crabbes lived, and, while he might possibly be able to pass letters on to Vince at Durmstrang if the Rosier-Henlin children would agree to it, it would be much harder to actually remove him from the school.

"Now will you talk to me?"

Startled, Harry turned around, and found that Draco's face had gone more and more stone-like. He blinked. "You didn't seem to want to talk to me," he said. "So I waited. Was that the wrong decision?"

"Yes." Draco bit off the word. "The monitoring spell told me that you'd left the house, Harry, but not in time for me to stop you, because you were Apparating. You should have come and told me."

Harry blinked again. "I went with your mother, Draco."

"You still should have told me."

Harry braced himself. He'd thought he would hit one of these fences with his allies sooner or later, but he could have wished for anyone other than Draco to experience it with. Still and all, it was here, and he would have to face it. "I agreed to the monitoring spell because it was the punishment you wanted to impose," he said quietly. "I never said I thought it was a good idea."

Clouds moved across Draco's face, and then settled and darkened into a thunderhead. "You were *humoring* me?"

"Yes."

Draco shook his head. "This is something I've been meaning to discuss with you anyway, Harry," he said. "I don't feel that you give me enough. You do what I want only when it isn't really inconvenient. You never give me something just because *you* want to give it to me, other than birthday and Christmas gifts. I've given you an awful lot." He leaned forward and stared into Harry's eyes. "I don't even know if you're really in love with me, even though I've taken the risk of telling you that I am with you."

Harry waited. He expected to feel resentment or anger building in him.

Instead, he felt the same strange excitement he'd experienced the other day when Draco had said he would push Harry more, and he smiled. Draco stared at him, looking caught off balance, and then annoyed for having been caught off balance.

"I'm glad that you've decided to push," said Harry. "It'll make things more honest. And the last thing I want ever again is a relationship where I or the other person or both of us just ignore what's lying at the bottom of it." Because of the Pensieve, his mind went first to Sirius, but then he thought about Connor, and his parents, and Dumbledore, and Snape, and even Draco sometimes, and how much trouble had come from just not saying things. "I'm glad," he repeated.

Draco reoriented himself with what looked like an effort. "I am angry with you," he said.

"Good," Harry replied. "That means that I can say that I think the monitoring spell is a silly punishment. I'm not sneaking off anymore, Draco. I've kept that promise for nearly four weeks now, and I haven't complained about it before. But if you're going to get upset every time I leave Hogwarts or the Manor without asking *you*, specifically, even if I'm in the company of someone else, then it's not doing either of us any good. Think of something else that you want."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I want you to think of something that you want to give me, and then give it to me, freely."

Harry felt a tremble of possible panic. He suppressed it. Draco was doing something that Harry respected him tremendously for, and it was the kind of challenge that Harry couldn't resist in other possible arenas. He would conquer it in this one, too. This was something he *did* want, no matter the obstacles in the way. He would jump them, because it was what he did.

"All right," he said. "Will you take the monitoring spell off, now?"

Draco eyed him cautiously, but drew his wand and did it without pause, to his credit. Harry sighed in relief when it was gone, though it hadn't been much more than a small chill presence he only noticed sometimes. He looked Draco in the eye when it was finished.

"When we're done walking some of the more difficult paths, you won't need something like that ever again, because I'm going to show you that you can trust me completely."

Hope like a slender ray of sunshine parted Draco's clouds. He did say, "It'll be hard."

"Good," said Harry, with a dryness he hadn't known he was capable of. "I don't know what I would do if it were *easy*."

And with that, Draco smiled, and Harry found his breath catching, almost in spite of himself.

But not quite.

I do, he could repeat to himself, and at the moment, the future looked as fiercely green as a summer meadow after rain. *I do want this, and I'm going to fight the things that might get in my way, and I'm going to win.*

No. We're going to win.

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

Chapter Thirteen: Securing the Tunnels

Harry relaxed when he'd read the letter once, but he couldn't quite help reading it a second time, just to make sure that everything was happening the way he'd wanted it to happen.

Dear Mr. Potter:

Given what you have told me about the attack on the London Underground, I am not inclined to discount the information. In fact, it will take relatively little to secure the tunnels from most convenient points of entrance from the wizarding world. But I would expect You-Know-Who to strike in Muggle territory itself. For persuading the goblins to take such an extra risk, your help would be extremely valuable. They feel they owe you honor, though no debt; the hanarz has been quite clear on the fact that their promise to change slowly and not inform the wizarding world at large of their freedom for some time settles that obligation. But they would at least listen, and you may be able to strike another bargain with them, to show them why they should care for Muggles at all. They expect to see you at Gringotts between the hours of eight and nine on the fourteenth of August.

Best wishes.

Griselda Marchbanks.

Harry sent back a short note, and went downstairs. He knew he was smirking. He couldn't help it. Argutus rode his shoulder, and sometimes touched his tongue to Harry's cheek, and sometimes asked what certain things they passed were and what they did. Harry told him when he thought the Omen snake could understand. It was already remarkable how much he could understand

compared to two weeks ago. He even seemed to have some grasp on the nature of Harry's relationship with Draco, which was more than Harry could say about himself.

Now, he said, "*You watch the pale one very often, and you smell of concern for him. Do you suspect something about him?*"

Harry paused with one hand on the door of the reading room where Narcissa spent many of her evenings. "How did you know that, Argutus?" he murmured.

Argutus wound his body in a figure-eight pattern, which he'd chosen as his equivalent to a shrug after spending a whole afternoon asking about human gestures of uncertainty. "*It seemed likely from the way that you look at him,*" he said. "*And of course human scents express all kinds of information that you never think to conceal from snakes like me.*"

Harry nodded slowly. "I've been watching Draco because I think there's something he's not telling me," he murmured, keeping his voice low. He'd had occasion to reflect in the past few days, when he turned around and found Lucius staring at him, that there was another Parselmouth in the house. And one of the things he'd noticed from his observation was the careful, cold courtesy with which Lucius and Draco danced around each other. "But I want to figure it out on my own, and reassure him that he can tell me whatever he likes."

"*Is that not true now?*"

"Not yet," said Harry. "I don't think he'd believe me unless I already know what it is. This is the gift I'm giving him: showing that I know him as well as he knows me."

"*Hmmm.*"

Harry shook his head at the snake's commentary and opened the door. Narcissa looked up at once from the letter she was writing, tense as a coiled basilisk, and then relaxed at the sight of him. "Harry," she said. "I thought—never mind. You had something that you wanted to say?"

Harry nodded. "I know that we were planning to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow anyway," he said. "Can we go a few hours earlier, though? Madam Marchbanks just sent me a letter. The southern goblins want to talk to me in Gringotts, between the hours of eight and nine."

Narcissa shook her head, and Harry's heart dipped for a moment, but then he realized it was a gesture of astonishment instead of refusal. "Only you would be able to do things like this, Harry," she said. "Yes. There are a few shops in Diagon Alley that I want to visit anyway, and I might as well do it in the cool of the morning as the heat of the afternoon."

That might be a problem, then, Harry thought, his mind working fast. *If Vince is going to meet me between ten and eleven, I'll have to make sure that we stay in Diagon Alley until eleven at least.*

He had not discounted the possibility that Vince's father had found out about his letter, of course. That did not matter, because Harry could handle a trap. The main thing he wanted was Vince close to him.

"I haven't been out of the Manor but a few times this summer, though," he said, and stared at the floor. "A battle, and the Ministry, and Grimmauld Place." He stared back up at her. "Can we please spend a few hours in Diagon Alley beyond that?"

Narcissa clasped one hand inside the other, a graceful gesture of worry that Harry had never seen her perform. "Is this part of the therapy that you discussed with Madam Shiverwood, Harry?" she asked.

I was supposed to do something pleasant or selfish for myself each day. It was the first time Harry had thought of the advice since he received it. But he had no intention of discarding such a useful tool as a plausible explanation.

"Well, staying in Diagon Alley a few hours longer would please me," he said. "But if you think it's too dangerous—"

Narcissa cut him off. "We can leave the moment it becomes dangerous, Harry. But the *moment* it becomes dangerous, do you understand?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. It really would please him, and even though he was luring danger to him, he didn't think Narcissa would mind, because he never intended her to find out about it.

The only successful conspiracy is one that is never discovered.

Lucius put the book of medical magic down on the chair beside him, and then crossed to his shelves. Most of the books on magical creatures were well-thumbed, since Harry and Draco both used them for research, but they put them back again when they were done. They knew that Lucius would not have been pleased if they did not.

Lucius's fingers drifted from spine to spine, until he found the one that interested him the most. *Within: Magical Parasites*. He drew it down, tapped it with his wand, and murmured the spell that would let him find the first occurrence of the word he wanted in the book.

That turned out to be only a glancing reference, so he had to search again, and then again. The third time was the lucky try. Lucius could feel his lips parting as he read, as *Within* confirmed what he had read in the book on medical magic. It seemed that a certain species of insect had once been used to treat the aftereffects of curses, feeding on and destroying the dangerous Dark magic. As spells had advanced to take their place, however, the Healers had gratefully abandoned them. The procedure to implant them was really *most* disgusting.

There was also an interesting bit of information on what they did when they were accidentally introduced into someone healthy, which Lucius read with careful attention, and then memorized.

He put the book back, and returned to his desk to write a polite letter to the Magical Menagerie. He doubted that they would have what he wanted on hand, but he would be in Diagon Alley tomorrow, and he requested the honor of an interview with the shop owner. She could surely order it for him.

He smiled as he sent that owl off, and allowed his gaze to linger on one drawer in the desk, where he had locked the return letter from Ollivander. The wand-maker had agreed to his plan. Of course, believing that he owed his life to Lucius, he had had little choice about it. He could have resisted if he had known the truth, but Lucius had no chance of letting him find that out.

He knew the saying about successful conspiracies.

Harry entered Gringotts with more confidence than he'd felt the first time he came there, his hand resting on one pocket in his robes, but that didn't last long. A goblin he hadn't seen before, wearing a silver chain around her neck that Harry also hadn't seen before, came up and bowed to him the moment he set foot in the bank.

"Mr. Potter?" she asked. "If you will follow me now?" To most of the wizards and witches around him, Harry supposed, it would sound like the typical polite greeting. But she met his eyes defiantly, which no goblin would have done before, and she didn't offer him her name, or any courtesies once he'd nodded. She turned around and walked on, and Narcissa and Draco, who came behind Harry, found themselves engaged with two goblins who moved so smoothly to intercept them that Harry didn't realize what was happening before it was done.

Harry followed the female goblin still, allaying his own fears. It was ridiculous to think that the goblins would try to kill or harm the wizards just because they were free of their web now. It was a prejudice that Albus Dumbledore would have been proud of. He should remember that he was dealing with proud, independent, free beings now, and, moreover, ones that had suffered abuses at the hands of wizards for centuries. He would just have to live with whatever discomfort that brought him. The goblins had borne worse.

They entered the back of the bank, and here, Harry found the differences even more pronounced. The goblins who passed him had a light, brisk trot, just fast enough to get their work done without tiring them. Most of them openly wore chains of silver or bronze or gold, and sometimes a stone ornament that none of them let Harry see closely once they realized he was human. Those seemed to be pendants with seven sides. Harry had no idea what they meant.

He wondered if he would feel this out of place in Muggle London. He experienced a sudden spasm of regret that he'd never got to go. He thought it would probably be good for him.

The female goblin led him into what was recognizably a cave, rather than the meeting room he'd seen the first time. The very

rock of Gringotts was transforming around them, Harry thought, as he exchanged nods with the *hanarz*. He wondered what it would look like when the goblins broke free of their self-imposed slow change and made the wizarding world notice them.

I hope I'm here to see it.

“Mr. Potter.” The *hanarz* leaned forward. Strings of metal glittered and flashed on her body, woven into her clothes, and, apparently, her skin. “Tell us more details of this attack that you say is going to take place on the autumnal equinox.”

Harry willingly told her every detail of the dream, including the ones that hadn't been about the attack. Perhaps the goblins would know something about the wooden circles Bellatrix had been carving, or could direct him to someone who did. And when he mentioned the tangled pattern on them, the *hanarz* did indeed nod wisely.

“That represents the maze of tunnels that connect our world with the London Underground,” she said. “It is ancient magic, the use of wood to triumph over the stone and metal of the tunnels. It can crack them even as tree roots can crack stone. Voldemort will put one on every tunnel entrance, seeking to split any protections on them and obtain easy passage for his army.”

She could suggest nothing similar for the werewolves, but Harry had already written to the three Light werewolves turned in April by Fenrir Greyback's bites, and to Hawthorn. They had promised they would try to get in contact with other werewolves, but none of them had had much contact with any packs, let alone those Greyback would speak to. Harry had written to Remus, too, but post to the Sanctuary went so slowly that he wondered if Remus would arrive before it became a non-issue. He suspected that there was little to be done about the ones who would fight in Voldemort's ranks in any case. He could not offer a cure for lycanthropy, or anything else that would interest them in him immediately. Even his ability to provide Wolfsbane Potion was limited now that he didn't have much money.

“We will help you secure the tunnels.”

Harry blinked and looked up at the *hanarz*. “You will?” He had expected that it would take much more arguing to get her to agree, especially since Madam Marchbanks had said that the goblins didn't consider themselves in debt to him.

“We are capable of recognizing dangers to our own world,” said the *hanarz* briskly, moving around the far side of the cave, in a path that never put her closer than about ten feet to Harry. “We still share this world with wizards, though they have done us little good—one witch and one wizard excepted.” Her gaze speared Harry for a moment. “We will help you on this, though we may not on the more isolated attacks.”

“That is all I can ask for,” Harry responded as he followed her, wondering what exactly they would do. *Surely securing all the tunnels will take longer than the hour she asked to meet with me?*

“At least you are polite,” said the *hanarz*. “And you have not deceived us.” She made a sharp snap of her fingers that echoed like clicking bones and resulted in two goblins, both with stone ornaments around their necks and quivers of arrows on their backs, instantly springing up to escort them. She glanced back at once Harry. “Have you found anything that would enable you to free our northern relatives?”

Harry shook his head. Even with the Light allies he now had, he was very far from being able to convince the Light pureblood families to give up their linchpins, their ancestral homes, and as long as those linchpins stood, then the net on the northern goblins would endure.

“Pity,” said the *hanarz*, and then led him down into the bank, yet another set of tunnels that Harry had not seen before.

The earth around them grew wilder and wilder, rougher and rougher, and Harry suspected they were getting into areas that no longer lay under Gringotts. Soon, though, he became unsure of what material actually surrounded them—soil, stone, or metal. It gleamed and flashed in the light that the silver chains on the *hanarz* began radiating, rather like steel. But Harry brushed against it once or twice, and found it warm, and as hard as rock. He shook his head, and decided that he wouldn't try to solve the mystery. So long as the goblins knew where they were going and would be able to prevent the attack that Voldemort planned to unleash from taking the Muggles, then Harry would rest content.

The *hanarz* turned around when they finally came to a door. “What you are about to see, no humans has ever seen,” she said.

Harry drew in a startled breath, but she hadn't allowed him time to react. She turned away instead, and opened the door with a touch of her fingers. Harry thought he saw a chain link glimmering for a moment in her spread hand, but it was gone when he

looked for it again.

The door opened.

The room beyond the door breathed. That was the only way Harry could think of to describe it. It was magic, he knew that, but it didn't feel like anything he'd ever touched, though it was as powerful as several of them—his own wandless magic, the corrupt truce-dance that Voldemort had employed in the graveyard, the Dark power of Walpurgis Night. It flowed out to welcome the goblins, though it hesitated over Harry until the *hanarz* shook one of the lengths of metal that Harry was now sure ran into her flesh. Then it enwrapped him, too, and it was like nothing so much as being swallowed by some enormous warm beast with no teeth.

Harry tried to grasp it, both with his own magic and with his understanding. They slipped again and again. Harry shivered—with excitement, not fear. This was magic he would never know, never learn, and that was all right. There should still be some mysteries left in the world.

The *hanarz* moved to stand in the center of the room. She held out her arms and turned her back to Harry and the door. One of the two goblins who had accompanied them at once hurried forward and removed the loose robes that were all she wore in the way of clothing.

That revealed her fully. Oddly, the first impression that Harry had of her, perhaps because of the dark gray of her skin, was of a dungeon. Lengths of chain were riveted to her shoulders and sewn under the skin of her back. One pair of conjoined manacles hung from the back of her right knee. Small, polished rubies winked along her spine like the eyes of rats hiding in corners. The silver chain around her neck was the only one that looked like an ornament. The rest was, Harry sensed, the ordinary armory of a working *hanarz*. He wondered how long it had been since the goblins had been like this, and how much longer since any human had caught a glimpse of what they could be.

He closed his eyes, humbled almost beyond belief.

He opened them quickly enough when the *hanarz* began to sing.

It was a song that would have done a raven proud, full of rolling, discordant noise, the clash of chains and thunder. Most of the chains on her body rose up and danced to it. The longest link, the one around her shoulders, lashed down and wrapped about her arms, drawing them behind her back and up over her head. The *hanarz* showed no sign of pain, even when Harry knew that one of her shoulders must be close to dislocation. She just kept singing, and the metal writhed around her and encased her.

Then she spun.

The chains duplicated themselves, perfect in every respect except that their copies weren't fastened to the *hanarz*. They followed her for a moment, and then sprouted more copies, and more, and more. Then they snapped outward.

Harry ducked as one of them flew at him. When he looked up, though, he could see it thinning like mist. It hit the wall and sailed right on through, vanishing. Harry stared after it, and wondered what sprouting illusions of chains would do.

"It is to secure the tunnels," the goblin standing behind him murmured, sounding a bit awed. Harry wondered if the emotion came from never having seen this himself. "She has sent the chains to the tunnels that stretch in all directions, from here to the Muggle world, and under us as well. They will lie in wait. If basilisks or any with the Dark Mark on their arms walk past them, then they will rise."

He didn't elaborate on what they would do then. He didn't have to. Harry shivered, and was glad that the southern goblins were on his side.

He suspected that Draco and Narcissa would be unhappy about his having left them in the upper bank, but, as he watched the *hanarz* helped back into her robe, he thought seeing this had been worth it—just like the fragile thing in his pocket, which he touched to assure himself it was still there and unbroken, was worth the risk of their scoldings.

The world is changing. I know the goblins are ready for it, but I wonder if the wizards are.

Lucius found it easy to accompany his wife and son and Harry to Diagon Alley that morning, and to slip away during the time they went to Gringotts. After all, he did not need to withdraw money from the Malfoy vaults himself, and Narcissa accepted that he did not want to spend every minute with Harry the way that she and Draco did. And it was even more natural to walk into Ollivander's, and catch the old man's eye, and wait patiently until he dismissed his latest customer. Lucius concealed a sneer as the witch walked past. Any woman who found her wand so easily was hardly formidable.

Ollivander bustled about, closing his door and hanging dark curtains over the windows. As he did so, the lamps in the shop came to life, flames contained in heavily enchanted glass shells so that they stood no chance of lighting the wands on fire. Lucius curled his lip as he stared up at the boxes of wands and wands. There was no way that Ollivander could have made them all, and that would mean that most of them were worth far less than what he charged for them.

But then, that is the way of those who sell things for a living, Lucius thought, and turned away to find the older wizard regarding him with a certain air of resignation.

"It is ready?" he asked.

"It is, yes, sir." Ollivander drew out a box from beneath the counter and put it reverently on the surface. He was slipping back into his seller's persona, as Lucius had thought might happen. "A bit of crafting it cost me, but it will fit your hand perfectly and work for the spells that—"

"That I specified, yes." Lucius did not wish Ollivander to speak their names aloud. There were, lately, rumors of Aurors using spells that let them draw out the memories of spoken words from the walls of a room. In that way, letters were much safer. Lucius did not intend to be caught.

He opened the box, and eyed the wand lying there.

It was made of ash, and Lucius knew it would have a dragon heartstring core, because he had asked for it. He lifted the wand from the box with his left hand, and felt a single thrum of deep, true magic shoot up his left arm. He smiled and graced Ollivander with a slight nod.

"It will do," he said. "Since I do not intend to pay you for it, the creation of a blank wand must be reward enough."

Ollivander bowed his head and was silent. He knew as well as Lucius that blank wands—wands created for only a single purpose, to be dropped and discarded when the task was done—were illegal, banned by the Ministry. They had no essential connection to the wizards who wielded them, not like their own wands, nor to their makers. When they were discarded, no spell could track them back to their owners, because they had never really been owners, only users.

A blank wand was perfect for what Lucius had in mind.

He slid the blank wand into his pocket and headed up the street at an easy walking pace, to find the Magical Menagerie.

The world is changing, and I will be a single small and unnoticed change in the middle of it. But I suspect I am the one that will cut the deepest.

Harry came out of Flourish and Blotts loaded down with books for the next school year. He was carrying half of them in the crook of his right arm, and half floating behind him, despite Draco's hints—due mostly, Harry was sure, to his agitation about being left behind in the bank—that that would cause people to notice him and stare at him more.

So let them stare. It's not like they're not already doing it.

Harry had felt the pressure of eyes from the moment they emerged from Gringotts. More wizards and witches were bustling about now than at the early hour of eight when they arrived, and most of them would have read the Prophet. They would be used to photographs of him, Harry thought glumly. After she'd refused his offer to conduct an interview with him, Skeeter had taken to talking about his exploits from the past year, and putting photographs of him as he was then under the grimmest details available to the public about his child abuse. She didn't do much more than that. She didn't have to. Harry had read those few of the articles he could stand to read. She was doing a much more effective job at smearing his parents and Dumbledore by her silent portrait of

his survival than the gossip articles by Melinda Honeywhistle and her ilk, which often contradicted themselves the next day.

It didn't take long for the first motherly witch to come up to him, sniffing, and exclaim over the loss of his poor hand, and want to see his left wrist, because "my sister's a Healer at St. Mungo's, and I just know that I've inherited some of her Healing skill." Harry extended it to her, but pulled it back the instant she started to draw out her wand.

"That's all right," he said politely. "I think I'd like the name of your sister instead. Can I have it?"

He let the name slide through his head. He had no intention of going to that particular Healer, but it made the witch happy to think she was doing some good, and it got rid of the chance that she would cast dangerous magic on his stump.

That was only the beginning. One pureblood Light wizard exclaimed that Harry was too young to have suffered such a degrading wound, and offered to let him know about discount prices on artificial hands. A few people wanted to "talk" to him about his abuse; those, Harry refused outright, knowing they would turn around and sell their stories to the papers. Others lingered and stared at him with pitying eyes, but hurried away when Draco stared back at them. Draco was getting twitchy, and Harry was wondering if the biggest obstacle to his plan to rescue Vince would actually be Draco's determination to bundle him off home, rather than just staying in Diagon Alley until eleven that morning.

He spent a moment watching Draco glare at the back of one witch who had actually started to come up and open her mouth, but then had burst into sobs and veered off. There was no denying that Draco had grown taller, of course—Harry had finally, *finally* started to follow him there, at least—but it was more than that. He held himself more nervously now than he had at the start of summer. His hand was in his pocket and clasping his wand more often.

And he hadn't mentioned his empathy very often. In fact, he hadn't at all picked up on Harry's smug excitement last night or this morning, though he'd noticed the time Harry spent alone in his room, studying maps of Diagon Alley.

Harry narrowed his eyes. *The change that's taken place has something to do with his empathy, I bet.*

And then the things he'd been waiting for happened, and he had no more time to think about that.

Someone moved off to the left side of him, coming from between Flourish and Blotts and the stationary shop next to it. Harry spun towards it, his magic flickering up to shove his books out of the way. He was already murmuring *Protego* charms under his breath, and he knew they would be ready to deflect any hexes from coming at Narcissa and Draco and the other people in the Alley. Those maps had come in handy. He knew the best angle from every shop to hang his Shield Charm wards and cage him and his attackers in a private arena.

He didn't hang any in front of himself. The whole point was to look unprepared.

A heavysset wizard with what Harry was sure must be a glamour cast on his face—he looked like Dumbledore—dashed from between the buildings, casting spells at him. Harry was already moving, though, his eyes wide open and his breath and his tension hammering in his chest and his lungs. He needed to find Vince, and he needed to make himself a target until the moment when he could safely rescue Vince and get away.

Two more people glamoured to look like Dumbledore were coming around Quality Quidditch Supplies, their wands pointing directly at him. Harry gasped, as if caught by surprise, and stopped. His magic reared up inside of him, but the ability he was unleashing wasn't something they would sense, or know how to stop.

Two hexes came at him at once, one a Body-Bind and one a *Diffindo*. Harry had to snort. He wondered if Voldemort wanted him captured or killed, or if the two Death Eaters were simply operating on different levels.

The snake of his magic-draining ability snapped out in front of him and swallowed the hexes. Harry was dodging, though, as if he had only escaped by pure luck. He made sure to utter a little scream, to show that he was frightened, at least supposedly. Sure enough, his two attackers pounded after him, joined a moment later by the third.

Harry listened to the screaming and scattering of the other people in the Alley, and waited until his opponents were directly in front of him.

Then he spat out the magic he'd swallowed, as a wave of pure force.

It slammed all three of them backwards, either into the walls of the nearest shops or the Shield Charms, which they bounced off of. Harry snorted and looked around once more. *Vince, Vince, where is Vince?*

He caught sight of a small, hooded figure standing motionless—with the kind of stillness that could only indicate a *Petrificus Totalus*—in one of the alleys next to a heavily cloaked wizard. The wizard pulled back the hood that covered the small figure's face, and revealed Vince. Harry nodded.

“How does it feel, Mr. Potter,” the wizard, who must be Mr. Crabbe, asked, “to know that your letter was intercepted and your plan known from the beginning?”

Harry didn't bother replying. He had anticipated that this might happen, and that meant planning ahead. His hand was already drawing the object he'd brought from his robe pocket. It had survived unbroken.

He caught Mr. Crabbe's attention with a Hotfoot spell, and sent the glass serpent whisking towards Vince, murmuring, “*Portus!*” to it as it tumbled.

A Portkey now, as it had always been since Draco had given it to him for his thirteenth birthday, it struck the motionless Vince, and he vanished. He would be safe behind the wards of Malfoy Manor now, Harry knew. That left him here, but that was the point. He was the one who had risked danger to himself and other people and property by luring the Death Eaters to the Alley in the first place.

It was up to him to clean it up.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. The three Death Eaters had climbed back to their feet, and Mr. Crabbe had finally managed to put out the stinging fire on his foot. Narcissa and Draco were still stuck behind the Shield Charms that made a cage of Harry's part of the Alley, though pounding frantically as they tried to get in.

Harry half-closed his eyes. Really, it was flashy, and he usually disdained to throw his wandless magic around this way. There were better uses for it.

But it would catch the Death Eaters quickly. That was the main point of this exercise.

Harry concentrated, remembering the way he had trapped Dobby in order to get some answers out of him when the house elf came to find him in second year. Blue light surged and flooded out of him, and then fell around the Death Eaters like a rain, solidifying and rising up into hard walls of azure. The first two Death Eaters glamoured as Dumbledore were caught almost at once, and Harry spent a moment building up the cages firm and tight. If they could prevent a house elf's Apparition, then they could prevent a wizard's.

When he looked sideways, however, it was to find the two other cages empty. Mr. Crabbe and the unknown Death Eater had Apparated away.

Harry breathed out in disappointment, but he was, more truly, satisfied. The only damage looked to be a few impact marks on the nearest walls, and really, any ordinary housekeeping charm could repair those. And, of course, the Death Eaters were wounded, but Harry cared about them far less than he cared about the other people in the Alley, who had either run away or were staring at him.

He lifted the Shield Charms, opening the Alley once more, and then there was an awkward moment where both Draco and Narcissa had come up to him and tried to hug him at once.

“What happened?” demanded Draco. “I saw you throw something, but I couldn't see what it was from behind the wards.”

Harry maintained his innocent expression. “I had my Portkey on me,” he said. “The serpent that you gave me, Draco. I thought I'd bring it just in case we *did* run into danger here in the Alley. And when I saw that his father was holding Vince hostage—“

“He *was*?” Draco sounded disappointed. “I didn't see that, either.”

Harry looked inquiringly at Narcissa, who shook her head. Harry relaxed. He'd had a moment's fear that his plan would be uncovered when Mr. Crabbe talked about intercepting his letter, but with all the screaming and the muffling effects of the Shield Charms, it wasn't surprising that neither Draco nor Narcissa had heard.

“Well, he *did*.” Harry put a petulant tone into his voice, as though he were trying to deflect lectures about not using the Portkey to save himself. “I’d written to Vince and asked to see him the other day, but I had no idea that he would be here in the person of a *hostage*.” *There. That tone of feigned innocence is perfect.* “I’d just thought I could talk to him, see if he needed help. Unfortunately, his father must be reading his post, and he brought friends with him.” He sighed and dropped his head. “And then his father got away. I captured two of the others, though.” He gestured at the two caged Death Eaters.

“That was *stupid* of you, Harry,” Draco said, his face pale with anger. “You should have thought that Mr. Crabbe might read Vince’s post.”

Narcissa agreed with him, rather loudly. Harry accepted the scolding in humble silence. He would much rather receive a scolding for being stupid than one for risking his life.

He was aware that he was still breathing hard, and not from exertion. That had been a wilder rescue than he had thought it would be, filled with wild chances. Narcissa and Draco would have guessed his plan if they’d heard Mr. Crabbe’s words. Something could so easily have gone wrong, including the injury of others—at least if he hadn’t been good enough at defensive magic to hang the lines of Shield Charms that caged his pursuers in with him so fast. And if Harry hadn’t been prepared to use his wandless magic good and hard, then all the Death Eaters might have got away.

He found that he could hardly wait to do something like that again.

It’s like flying. You tilt down, and then all you can do is survive as hard as you can.

“Let us go home.”

Harry turned to find Lucius behind him. Most of the people in the Alley seemed to have recovered from their shock by now and were pressing forward, and Lucius obviously didn’t want to be questioned by the public, or by the Aurors when they showed up. For once, Harry thought, they were in perfect agreement.

He concealed a bright smile as he Apparated back to the Manor with Lucius, Narcissa coming behind him with Draco at her side. *There’s going to be a lot of fallout from this, no doubt, but not nearly as much as there could have been. And at least Vince is safe.*

And as long as they have a plausible tale on the surface—me not thinking—then they’re not going to look underneath and see this as a calculated risk with my life.

Lucius shook his head in the moments before he walked up to his family and Harry and declared that the time had come to return to the Manor. He had just been coming out of the Magical Menagerie—the owner had been most obliging, and promised to order what he wanted the moment she could—when his one-time fellows attacked, and so he hadn’t had a good view. Somehow, though, from the small smiles he surprised on Harry’s face if nothing else, he was sure that Harry had planned this, and had it fall out just as he wanted.

In one stroke he rescues a classmate who probably appealed to him for help, appears a hero once more, and reduces his enemies by two. He plays a very risky game, but a risk achieved is a triumph worth any odds.

For the first time, Lucius thought there was a certain likeness between him and Harry Potter, and that he might like binding the boy to the family for more reasons than just his power and Draco’s apparent infatuation with him. Not that he would tell the boy that, of course.

A plausible reason on the surface is worth any amount of lies.

~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Fourteen: Bearing Gifts

Conscience is like a scorpion, Harry thought.

It was a thought he was having only because he still lay awake, his hand folded behind his head. He wouldn't be having it if he could just close his eyes and go to sleep. He was being silly. Everything had worked out. Vince had been too much in shock to talk at first when they returned to the Manor, and later Harry had seen him alone and convinced him not to tell the Malfoys anything. Vince had agreed tamely. He kept staring around him with wide eyes, as if he believed that his father would appear from around a corner at any moment and kidnap him back.

Harry had awaited a summons to the Ministry with some dread, thinking he might have to account for his actions, or perhaps testify that his attackers were Death Eaters. The only communication, however, came via a polite owl from Scrimgeour, informing him that the Aurors had transported the cages of blue light back to the Ministry's new prison, Tullianum, and were currently keeping them there. The cages would be even more secure than prison cells for the Death Eaters, right now. They might summon him when they wanted the cages dissipated, but for the moment, everything was well.

Except that it wasn't.

Harry rolled over and closed his eyes more tightly, so that the very faint moonlight coming through the window didn't make any impressions on his eyelids. Argutus slithered briefly across him, reacting to the change in position, and then relaxed. Harry waited to go to sleep.

He didn't.

His conscience went on stinging him, whispering various truths that Harry had thought he would be able to bear better than he was currently bearing them. *You know that you lied. You know that you took enormous risks. You know that Draco and Narcissa would see you as acting like a sacrifice again, though Lucius might not care.*

But I wasn't acting like a sacrifice, Harry argued back strenuously. I never meant to die, and I wouldn't have given up my life to save Vince. I was sure that I could get him out.

How sure?

Fairly sure! Harry almost wondered if Regulus had come back, since he would argue and scold like this, too, but he also knew that he would have recognized the older wizard's world-weary voice.

But what would have happened if something went wrong?

Nothing did. And if I worry about the consequences to every action, then I'll only drive myself mad with the uncertainty, always wondering if I could have done something better or faster than I wound up doing it.

The voice fell silent, but it didn't need to speak. Harry's conscience could sting him with guilt alone, and that was what it was currently doing.

He had lied to Draco.

He felt guilty about it. He really wished it hadn't been necessary. On the other hand, if he told him about it now, Draco would rage, and if he had told him about it before he tried to rescue Vince, Draco would never have let the rescue happen at all—and then Vince would have gone on suffering Merlin knew what, and likely ended up with a brand on his arm. Harry didn't know what he could do, since it seemed he lost any way he turned, and this was just the smallest set of losses he could choose. *Everything* he did would offend Draco.

Then don't choose for him. Choose for you.

Harry went still, his eyes actually popping open. There was a new idea.

He'd been thinking in terms of losses. What would happen if he thought about it in terms of gain? If he stopped thinking for just one moment that every step he took would tip him into a pit, and started thinking about which would ease the sting on his conscience most?

Put like that, the way out was simple. It would make him feel best to tell Draco what had really happened today, and take the rage or the scolding that followed. Harry winced as he remembered what Sirius's pride and unwillingness to reveal what he had truly suffered had cost him. Speech led to suffering—he knew *that*, too, after what Snape's speaking had done to his parents—but

silence led to greater suffering.

And there was a concrete goal, too, something to strive for other than just his own peace of mind. Harry smiled a bit as he stood, gently tucked the complaining Argutus into a corner of his left arm, and then made for the door. He would confront Draco right now, so that Lucius and Narcissa couldn't interfere and Draco would be a bit off-balance.

He wasn't the only one who had a silence to break.

Draco awoke immediately when Harry knocked on his door. He knew it was Harry without having to check, even though his empathy was only letting him feel the strongest of emotions now. He had been having odd dreams in which Harry featured prominently, and before that he had replayed the scene in Diagon Alley over and over in his head, trying to figure out what was missing. He knew *something* must be missing, but he could not figure out what. It was so typically Harry: not thinking before he did something to help a classmate, using weapons at hand, and using the Portkey that had been meant for his own safety to rescue Vince.

He opened the door for Harry, and was startled to find that he walked in with a decisive stride, his Omen snake coiled on his shoulder. Draco went to retrieve his wand so that he could cast a *Lumos*, but Harry flicked his hand, and the lamp beside the bed lit with a flash and a flare.

"Show-off," Draco muttered, turning and staring blearily at Harry. "What did you come to talk to me about?" He knew it must be talking; Harry would have been in much more of a hurry if the Manor had been attacked.

"About what happened in Diagon Alley today," said Harry. "I lied to you."

And just like that, Draco knew what the lie must be, and what it was about. He narrowed his eyes and took a long step away from Harry. Anger made his hands shake, but he clasped them behind his back and fixed Harry with a glare.

"I came to say that I'm sorry," said Harry. "I shouldn't have done it. I thought you wouldn't let me go to rescue Vince if you knew, and that was the only plan I could think of that would let him get close to me. So I told you that I brought the serpent Portkey along just in case there was trouble, but I knew Vince and probably several Death Eaters would be there. I studied the angles of the alley so that I could hang Shield Charms that would trap me inside with their spells, but something still could have gone wrong. It was *stupid*, as well as wrong, and I'm sorry." He paused, waiting for Draco to say something.

"There are times I hate you," Draco whispered.

Harry winced, but waited.

"You always apologize too late, and you never seem really sorry for it," said Draco, beginning to gather the wind into his wings. He could remember feeling more enraged with Harry, but not feeling this strong curdling of bitter disappointment at the bottom of the anger. "You know that I love you, yet other things seem to matter to you as much as I do, or more. You promise not to lie to me, and then do it *again*." He knew what he said next wasn't entirely fair, but he was angry. He was allowed to be unfair. "Sometimes you really are your father's son."

Harry's eyes began to glitter, but he held his peace. That only made Draco angrier. Most people would begin shouting at him, and then he could have the satisfaction of knowing that a passion existed which matched his own. Harry only stayed quiet, and while that made it easier to yell at him in some ways, it also made him seem as if he were keeping his temper.

"And you keep doing stupid things, too," said Draco. "When you realized that you'd been abused, I expected you to stop this, Harry—"

"Why?"

There it is. Harry's voice carried a knife's edge. Draco relaxed a bit. Angry as he still was, he knew that he was in control of the conversation now. He was making Harry respond, while his anger and disappointment were manageable.

"Because you aren't just acting out unconscious training any more, that's why!" Draco was startled to hear his own voice break in the middle, into a ragged, raw note of fury. *Perhaps I'm less in control than I thought.* "You know, and yet you keep putting

yourself in the middle of dangerous situations. This wasn't worth it, today."

"What wasn't worth it?" Harry moved a step forward, his head lowered and his gaze direct. Harry was still shorter than he was, but Draco nevertheless felt as if they stood eye-to-eye, and a good deal closer than they were now.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said. "This rescue. Nearly sacrificing your life to save Vince. He wasn't worth it—"

"That's the line," said Harry, and a brief burst of magic exploded from his body, sparking and then vanishing. "Other lives are as important to me as my own, Draco. Not more important. *That's* the only difference, now. Would you have said the same thing if I were rescuing your Mum, or you?"

Draco hesitated. He had the impression that he'd just edged onto dangerous territory, but he didn't know why. He persisted anyway. He knew he was right. Hadn't Harry admitted he was wrong?

"No," he said. "That's because she's my Mum and I love her, and of course I would want to be rescued. But I wouldn't want you to die rescuing me, Harry!"

"Well, good," said Harry, raising his eyebrows in an utterly infuriating way. "I'm not so eager to die anymore, either. But you're saying that Vince isn't important enough for me to take the risk, aren't you?"

"You're being unreasonable about it," said Draco, retreating into the cold haughtiness that he had seen win an argument for his father several times. "It's just that—well, he could be a spy, Harry."

"Vince?"

Well, no. Draco had to admit, considering the clumsy, shy boy he'd known for most of his life, who had been closer to the older students than any of his yearmates after Gregory Goyle went to Durmstrang, that he found it hard to imagine. Vince was loyal in a typical Slytherin way, and he could keep things hidden behind a stoic mask, but he wasn't able to interweave himself into someone's trust the way that a spy would have to be. About the best he could hope to do was observe things unnoticed, and the chance that he'd be able to get the drop on Harry was very small.

Still, his father had no reason to know that about Harry. He might have sent Vince anyway.

"That doesn't matter," said Draco. "It could apply in other situations. What if you spared a Death Eater, Harry, and then he turned on you? You'd still be taking a risk when you didn't have to. You're still doing that, in fact," he added, thinking of the cages of blue light that Harry had put around his attackers earlier that day. "You didn't use any lethal spells against them. You just banged them around a bit and captured the ones you could."

"I would prefer not to kill," said Harry quietly, some of the angry light in his eyes dying. "I've done it three times, and that's enough to make me hate it."

"Three—"

"Rodolphus, Mulciber, Dragonsbane Parkinson." Harry listed them all as if he spent time thinking about them at night.

Draco would almost have expected pity to overcome his rage, but the rage was way too strong. *And a good thing, too*, he thought. *Harry needs to hear this*. "You can't count Rodolphus and Mulciber."

"Can't I." Harry's voice was flat.

"They were both trying to kill you," Draco said. "Well, one was trying to kill you and the other one would have turned on you. It was self-defense, Harry."

Harry shook his head, his face gone calm and quiet. "There are things I'm willing to try and change, Draco," he said. "The lies I tell and the risks I take, for example—"

"You've said that before, too." Draco was unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Harry nodded. "I have. And I suppose I'm asking you now if you think that I can really make the changes—if you trust me."

Draco turned away and paced to the other side of the room. His hands were still shaking when he lifted one to touch his hair in a gesture of nonchalance, and he wished he'd kept it behind his back. He had to swallow several tumbles of words that wouldn't have made sense before he could speak.

"Why is the decision always up to me?" he asked, words catching like a hook in his throat. "*I'm* the one who takes all the risks, Harry. *I'm* the one who has to do things like pull you back from the edge and convince you that you're worth something, each and every *t-time*. *I'm* the one who told you that I loved you first, and I've gone all this time without much reciprocation. And now you're asking me to trust you without any proof. To make another sacrifice. You're not just performing sacrifices, Harry, you're requiring sacrifices of *me*."

"Then you need to step away." Harry's response was instant. "You need to breathe your own air, and take your own risks, and stop concerning yourself with what movements I make. Think about what you're going to do for yourself, Draco. What NEWT subjects do you want to take? What do you want to do other than just sit in Malfoy Manor all day? That wasn't enough for your father. Will it be for you?"

Draco ground his teeth. "You still don't *get it*," he said. "That's another sacrifice, Harry, requiring me to give up your company."

Harry laughed.

Draco twisted around. "How dare you—"

"Because you're being ridiculous." Harry's words were crisp, and his voice light and cutting as a whip. "You've twisted the idea of sacrifice into an all-encompassing one, Draco. No matter what I do, you can say that you're always right. If I give you trust and love and promises, and keep them, you can say I'm making sacrifices that I don't really want to make. If things stay the same, they're sacrifices of both myself and you. If I move away so that you can grow in your own sunlight, that's another sacrifice of yourself. That's not something I can argue with, and it points to very little trust or faith in *me*. If you think I'm making a sacrifice of everything, if you believe that's *always* my motive, then it doesn't matter if I really change, does it? You'll always be distrusting me, waiting for me to change back."

"But you haven't really changed so far!" Draco shouted, feeling himself backed into a corner. It was inconceivable that Harry might *win* this argument. He was *wrong*. He'd *said* so. "And you keep saying that you might, and then never keeping your promise!"

"What kind of action would inspire you to trust me?" Harry asked. "And when would I stop being suspected and tried in your mind?"

"I don't want to *tell* you! That's the kind of thing that you should be coming up with on your own! You're the one in the wrong here, not me! You were the one who lied and put your life in danger!"

"And you're the one who's kept silent about a change in your empathy," Harry snapped.

Draco could feel his face pale. He honestly hadn't thought about himself as lying in that regard. It was just a lie of omission. He did plan to tell Harry the truth, as soon as he could find the right time to do it.

"This is an argument about you," he tried.

"And it would have remained that way, if you hadn't tried to take the moral high ground." Harry's voice went on whipping down. "I can accept that I was wrong, Draco. I can accept your conditions. I cannot accept that you're blameless. If I owe you honesty and no sacrifices and somehow manage, impossibly, to both give you what you want and not involve you in the process of giving in any way, then you *owe me the same fucking things*."

"I can't," said Draco. "You're making me sacrifice." But his voice had sunk, and his urge to turn his face to the wall was strong.

Harry threw up his arms. "If you're not going to tell me, then we're equally balanced, I think," he said, with a snort. "We've both given sacrifices, and you've given me a lot more than that, while not involving me in the process of giving, you said. And now I've given you honesty, but you won't hand that back. Fine, Draco. Stew in that. I'm going to bed." He turned towards the door.

Draco felt a surge of astonishment. "You don't *walk* away from arguments," he said. "And you were wrong. You said so."

Harry glanced over his shoulder. “Yes, I did. And now what?”

“I could punish you—“

“I am not a child, Draco, and you aren’t my parent,” Harry said, voice dropping into a growl that caused a not entirely unpleasant shiver to run up Draco’s spine. “The usual course among *adults* is to accept the apology or tell the person apologizing that that isn’t enough, and that they’ll need time or a specific action or whatever. Not punishment. You don’t get to put another monitoring spell on me. I’m sorry that I allowed the first one. It obviously set a dangerous precedent.”

“If I tell you what would make me forgive you, then I’m sacrificing again,” said Draco.

“I told you to get rid of that idea. It does no good. And you should decide what you think I am, too.” Harry’s face had settled into a scowl. “A child to be punished, and accept the punishment meekly, or someone old enough and strong enough to make harsh changes in himself and stick to them. I think what you want is someone who’ll be silent under what you say, but also someone who’ll guess your every want before you express it, and fulfill those desires. Probably silently, too.”

The injustice of that claim fired Draco’s blood again. “I never said that I wanted you to be quiet!”

“Then what do you want from me?” Harry leaned forward. “I am sick of this fucking guessing game. And oh, yes, start and stare at me because I’m using language that you don’t want to hear. You’ve created a world where everything I do is wrong, Draco, everything is something you don’t want me to do, and I’m sick of it. It works no better than the little games you played last year, waiting for me to guess your love instead of telling me straight out. I hate head games. I hate manipulation. I hate making honest efforts and being told that no, I don’t know what I’m thinking, and it must be coming from some motive I didn’t know I had. I’ve contributed to this mess. Now we can either stand here asking whose fault it is, which frankly strikes me as a boring way to spend an argument, or we can try to settle the mess. I’ll show you what I want to give and to do, and you meet me halfway, Draco.”

Draco could feel himself breathing faster. He felt as if he stood on the edge of a cliff, and were about to plunge off. He had no idea how Harry could keep going if he felt the same way. And if he didn’t feel the same way, wasn’t this just another sacrifice that he was demanding of Draco?

“I’ve done so much for you, Harry,” he began.

“I’m not interested in discussing that.” Now Harry’s voice was a rapid staccato. “I’ve already chosen my direction, Draco—forward. Frankly, I think the only way we’ll ever really love each other is to think about and deal with all of this. *Constantly*. That means that we speak about the future as well as the past, and right now, the future is more interesting to me.”

“But I want to talk about the past,” said Draco.

Harry folded his arms and stared at him with a measuring glance. “Then talk.”

Draco scowled. “I shouldn’t have to,” he said. “I know that you’ve done wrong things in the past, and I can’t trust that you won’t keep doing them, Harry. I just *can’t*.” He knew his voice sounded pathetic on the last word, but he was thinking of Harry dying in the War, or at the end of the War, or confronting Voldemort, and not dealing with it well.

Harry’s face didn’t soften. He just gave a short nod. “Then I can give you my promise and try to live one day at a time without getting into danger, Draco,” he said. “But there are two things that are not going to change. I’m *never* going to think that someone who hasn’t harmed me ‘isn’t worth it.’ And I’m never going to be comfortable with killing. I’ll do it because I have to. You can’t control my attitude towards it, and I won’t allow you to.”

“But you’ll be miserable otherwise,” said Draco, feeling frustration curl like a worm in his stomach. “You have to get used to it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“But that’s the way it is!” Draco exclaimed. He’d been reading the histories of the Dark Lord’s War—he supposed he should call it the First War, now, since Voldemort had returned again—and the things he’d learned sickened him. One thing was clear, though. Soldiers became numb and hardened, or they didn’t survive. “You’ll be bleeding from the heart with every wound, otherwise.”

“That’s how I’ll know I’m still alive,” Harry said. “And I’m not like other people, Draco. I thought we established this already. Now. We have to decide how to make sure that you can live the way you want to, without drowning in my shadow. I want to know what you like to do.”

Draco just stared at him, feeling hopeless. “I don’t know,” he mumbled at last. “I know a few things I like, like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, but I haven’t thought about a career, if that’s what you mean. Malfoys don’t *have* to have careers.” He knew he sounded petulant. He didn’t care. He was trying to figure out what had gone wrong. A day ago, he thought, if Harry had been speaking these words, he would have been ecstatic. But something had changed between then and now. He wanted something else from Harry.

He couldn’t figure out what it was.

“I didn’t necessarily mean a career.” Harry’s tone was inflexible. “I mean what you want to be able to say at your death that you *did*. And that means besides loving me.”

Draco’s heart slowly started beating again. Knowing that Harry considered them as having a shared future helped immensely.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Most people don’t know right now.”

“But most people haven’t been as obsessed with a single person as you’ve been,” said Harry, his voice but not his words going soft. “They might have some idea. Wanting to travel to France, or become an Auror, or date a boy from Ravenclaw. They’re vague ambitions, they can change, but they have them. What are yours?”

Draco frowned. He was slowly moving past the fact that it was Harry asking him these things, and the part of his brain that demanded answers from himself was displeased. Did he really have *no* ambitions?

Well, no, that wasn’t true. There were some vague ambitions, as Harry said, though Draco hadn’t considered them worth anything because they didn’t have the rock-solidity of his own parents’ plans and dreams. And until tonight, he had thought more about the changes his soul had gone through than what the consequences of those changes might be. Grandiose visions of defying his father and becoming a hero in the War at Harry’s side—somehow—were as far as he’d got along that path.

Asked to solidify them, could he?

Of course I can. That’s a silly thing to ask.

“I like history,” he said. “And I’d like to be able to create spells, but I don’t know if I have the talent for it.”

“A lot of that is desire,” said Harry at once. “Some is power, too, of course. Snape created his own spells, and he’s powerful. But pressing need could drive you to make a spell.” A shadow fell across his face for a moment, and then he shook his head and dispelled it. “There are books in your library on it. Why have you never read them?” He was definitely curious now.

“I don’t know,” Draco muttered. “I guess I thought I wasn’t strong enough in magic, so it didn’t matter if I read them or not.”

“Read them,” Harry advised.

“What, you aren’t going to show them to me?” Draco demanded.

“No,” said Harry, “for the same reason that I haven’t included you in every *vates* negotiation I’ve ever had. That’s a part of my life that I sometimes want to share, but not always, and some parts of it you can’t follow me into. I want you to be able to have something of your own like that. I don’t have any special interest in creating spells. I’ll listen to what you really want to tell me, but I won’t support you step by step. If nothing else, I’m not sure I’ll have the time,” he added dryly.

“If this were a normal relationship, we wouldn’t have discussions like this,” Draco muttered. “We’d just grow into it.”

Harry covered the distance between them and put his hand under Draco’s chin, lifting it. That wasn’t fair, Draco thought, not when he was shorter. “This isn’t normal, Draco,” he said. “It never will be. If you want someone normal, then you should look away from me.”

His eyes were calm and honest, and Draco wanted to slap him. “Don’t you care at all?” he asked.

A faint smile quirked Harry's mouth. "You're doing it again," he said easily. "You expect someone to get angry about this, so you get upset when I don't. But I *do* care, Draco." His arms abruptly tightened around Draco in an embrace. "I don't want to lose you. But if it would be best for you to love someone normal, then yes, I would let you go. How could I keep you in prison, when I would hate it myself?"

Draco wondered for one moment if Harry was hugging him only because Draco might want him to, or because Harry really wanted to—

And then he wanted to smack himself in the forehead. *That* was what Harry was talking about. If Draco distrusted his every action because he thought the notion of sacrifice might lie behind it, then he couldn't really claim to trust Harry at all. He had to listen to his words and try to give Harry the second chances that he would have wanted extended to him.

"I don't want to love someone normal," he answered, gently pulling himself away from the embrace. "That means ordinary, and Malfoys don't do ordinary."

Harry laughed at him, and then waited. Draco enjoyed looking at him, but had the uneasy feeling that Harry expected him to say something.

"The thing about your empathy that you were hiding from me?" Harry prompted gently.

Draco shivered and closed his eyes. Harry would hate this. He just knew it.

On the other hand, he wanted to tell him. And Harry was right that he couldn't expect honesty where he wouldn't give it. And Harry had brought the topic back up, when it would have been easier on both of them to just let it go.

"My gift's mutated so that I can possess people," he admitted quietly. "I possessed a Death Eater during the battle at the Weasels', and made her Stun herself. Then I accidentally woke up in my father's body the other day. My empathy's getting smaller, so I think it turned into this. But it's really close to compulsion, and I knew that you'd hate me."

There. He'd said it.

He promised himself a full count of ten before he opened his eyes. But he cheated and peeked on four.

Harry was smiling gently at him, with a smile that Draco was almost sure he hadn't meant to let Draco see, trailing one finger just above the spot on his forehead where a scar like the lightning bolt would have been, if he'd had one. His face was tender, and open, and so full of love that Draco's throat started aching.

Harry blinked, and caught himself, and started to close his expression again. But he'd already noticed Draco's open eye by then. He hesitated, and relaxed his face into the smile again.

Draco almost forgot to be nervous.

"I don't blame you at all," Harry said quietly. "It's not like you asked for this, and it's not like you immediately started trying to use it to harm people. You need to practice with it, obviously, and get it under control."

"Who would let me possess his mind?" Draco asked bitterly.

"I would."

Draco started to open his mouth to say that of course Harry would do that, because he liked sacrifices, and paused. Could he really believe that someone with *that* expression on his face was only doing this because he would have done it for anyone?

"I trust you," Harry confirmed calmly. "And my mind's complex, reordered and rebuilt—good training for dealing with a simpler one. I know that I can fight back if I ever really feel threatened. It's the best solution. If you agree, of course."

Draco swallowed. He didn't really want to speak, because he was sure that any words would not have conveyed what he was feeling—the mixture of wary trust and gratitude and love.

He leaned forward and kissed Harry gently instead. Harry permitted it, even tilting his head to welcome him in. Draco felt himself becoming more composed as they kissed, and by the time he broke away, he knew that his cheeks weren't as flushed and his breathing was less rapid.

On the other hand, he was pleased to see, both of those things had happened to Harry.

Harry coughed and glanced away from him. "Is there anything else you can think of that we need to talk about?" he asked.

The way that you retreat from touching me? But Draco was more than content to wait for their next argument for that. This time, he would be the one who had the advantage over Harry, he thought. There was one part of their bond that was as much a competition as anything else. "Not until morning," he said.

Harry nodded to him, then said, "I'm still sorry, and I still think you should be," and marched to the door.

Draco sat down slowly on his bed, and, for the first time, allowed himself to think about the fact that they'd fought with words alone, not fists or magic, and that Harry had taken the initiative to come and tell him the truth, even though he hadn't had to; he could have distracted Draco thoroughly enough that he would let the nagging doubts go, especially in his own doubt about his possession gift.

But it hadn't happened that way.

It might not be normal, but I think it's better than that.

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

Interlude: A Need You Did Not Know You Had

August 11th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I know that you have found no suitable candidate for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I am writing to offer you my services. I have long experience in both Dark magic and the ways of protecting against it, and I intend to teach the children practical spells and countercurses that none of their previous professors have managed. It is, of course, your choice whether to employ me, but I think you would prefer my presence to that of some of the strangers who must otherwise inevitably appear. You have met me before, and I know the school inside and out, and am committed to its protection. You may not think that you can trust me, but you can.

Acies Lestrangle.

August 12th, 1995

I am not interested in employing anyone with that last name, much less a Dark witch. Quite apart from the question of whether to trust you or not, no parent would let their child be taught by someone with your rather unfortunate relatives. Please be so kind as not to insult my intelligence by asking again.

*Minerva McGonagall,
Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

August 12th, 1995

Dear Remus:

I hope that you will not think me unkind for appealing to you only now. I had heard nothing of you, and had hoped that you were happy, wherever you were.

Now I must ask that you come out of retirement. I have become Headmistress of Hogwarts, as you must have heard by now, and while I can juggle my duties as Transfiguration Professor with the help of some NEWT students until a suitable candidate can be found, I cannot continue to also be Head of Gryffindor House. I would like to ask you to return and take up this position.

I know that Ministry laws prevent werewolves from holding any paying employment. I have thought of a solution to get around this. I would offer you room and board at Hogwarts, as well as the Wolfsbane Potion that Severus brews, in exchange for your protection and counseling of the Gryffindor students.

Will this be acceptable? You are one of the gentlest men I know, and have a keen sense of right and wrong—sharpened, I think, by your experiences in recent years. I am sorry that I must ask you to return now, when two of your best friends and the previous Headmaster are awaiting trial, and Harry and Connor will be starting their fifth year. But I can think of no one else I would trust at this point in time.

Yours sincerely,
Minerva McGonagall.

August 14th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I think you mistake me. I am going to teach at Hogwarts School this year. The position of Defense Against the Dark Arts would be the easiest for me to take, and I know that you have found no candidate for it. Would you truly try to take those classes on your own overloaded shoulders, or give them to someone whom you do not know and cannot trust? Now, with the War beginning and this subject the most crucial in the school? I cannot believe that you would have so little care for your students.

You need not worry about my last name. For years, I have maintained another identity, under my mother's family name: Acies Merryweather. Very few people know of me, or the truth of me. I will not alarm any parents by taking up the post, and I assure you that my teaching skills are up to par.

Acies Lestrangle.

August 14th, 1995

Dear Minerva:

I have been in the Seers' Sanctuary, and I am glad that they have lifted the shadows around their home for right now, so that owls may fly in and out swiftly. Otherwise, it is likely that your post wouldn't have reached me until after the school year had already begun, and my answer might take almost as long to return.

I am delighted to take up your offer. I want to be in the world again. I think it's time. The main concern I have is the level of general knowledge as to my lycanthropy. There might be parents who object even to a werewolf not actually teaching their students, as long as I'm in the school, and even if they cannot bring legal objections against us. Are you prepared to deal with this?

Sincerely,
Remus Lupin.

August 15th, 1995

You cannot be serious. You are still a Dark witch, and my other objections still stand. You have come cloaked to me every time I have seen you. How could you teach a class like that?

Minerva McGonagall.

August 15th, 1995

Dear Remus:

I am prepared to fight. Dumbledore's reputation is in all the papers, and the stories about him grow wilder and wilder. I must be seen to be a leader, not merely cringing in the shadow of what he has done, and that includes making my own decisions, as defiant as they might have to be. I have written a polite letter to the Minister, both to inform him of my intentions and to tell him not to interfere. The other storms, I will brave as they come. In certain ways, your return could not have been better timed. The Daily Prophet and the lesser incarnations of the gossip rags are still talking about Harry's parents, about Dumbledore, about the upcoming trial, about the return of You-Know-Who, and about the effects of all of this on the Boy-Who-Lived and the Young Hero, as they have come to call Harry.

*Sincerely,
Minerva.*

August 16th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I can control myself for the length of time I have to teach classes. I will hold no student's gaze for more than a few minutes. That should make it all right. My eyes are the most dangerous part of me.

The Dark families who are likeliest to know me are all allies of Harry Potter. In fact, I myself am one of Mr. Potter's allies, though I must admit that I have not been in close contact with him lately. I have been speaking to the Deep Singers, whom you know as dragons. They will be there to help when the storms come. So they have promised me.

Come, Headmistress. You have still not found a candidate, for all your frantic interviews. I have seen that. I have told you one of the prophecies that Dumbledore knew and took care to keep concealed, and I am outside the wards, so that I can see the weaknesses in them. You have need of me. I am ready to fulfill that need.

Acies Lestrage.

August 16th, 1995

Dear Minerva:

That is all I needed to hear. Then I will come to Hogwarts. I ask only that you warn Harry and Connor about it in advance, so that they aren't shocked at seeing me. I should be there four days from now.

*Sincerely,
Remus Lupin.*

August 18th, 1995

Dear Remus:

Thank you. I will tell Harry and Connor about your return. I'll call Harry, at least, in to meet you a few days before the term starts. I think a face-to-face meeting would be more beneficial for him, and there is someone else I need him to forge a workable relationship with.

*Sincerely,
Minerva.*

August 20th, 1995

It seems I am not going to get rid of you, and I do need a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. None of the other candidates have been remotely suitable. I warn you, Lestrage. One foot or talon out of line, and I will destroy you, with all the power that is in both me and Hogwarts. I see no reason to hide behind pretty words or trust that I do not have.

*Minerva McGonagall,
Headmistress.*

August 21st, 1995

Dear Headmistress:

I assure you, that is perfectly acceptable to me. You may confirm with Harry Potter that I am in fact his ally. I will see you in two days. There is a bit of establishing to be done with the Merryweather accounts first.

Acies Merryweather.

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

Chapter Fifteen: Sitting on Voldemort

“Ready?”

Draco breathed out slowly and wiped his hands on his shirt. Harry blinked. He had realized that Draco was nervous, but for some reason, he hadn't thought he was *that* nervous. “Yeah,” he said at last, voice lower than usual. “I am. What about you?”

“I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't,” said Harry. He kept his voice low, soothing. He could already see that most of the calmness and composure in this exercise would have to depend on him. Draco was going to do it, but he would be struggling against the weight of his own panic. Harry wouldn't give him any extra fear to worry him.

He leaned backward and fixed his eyes calmly on Draco's, keeping them open to their widest extent and putting all the trust he could in them. Draco shivered, once, and then took a deep breath and returned the gaze.

Harry felt an odd push on his mind. It wasn't like compulsion, which had always resembled a wind to him when he noticed it at all. He lowered some of his shields and let it through, and then Draco was inside his mind.

It was a clenched fist-like presence, uncomfortable. Harry kept looking at Draco's face, focusing on the details of the line of his nose and the wisps of pale hair around his head, to keep himself from panicking. Draco, of course, startled and tried to withdraw.

“No,” said Harry aloud, and let the negative ring in his thoughts, too. Draco hesitated. “I made the decision to open my mind to you,” said Harry, and thought of the swirling patterns in Argutus's scales, of unicorns dancing, of Fawkes singing some of his calmer songs. “I want you to stay until you manage to possess me, Draco.”

Draco didn't nod, because his body appeared to go utterly rigid when he was in possession of someone else's mind. They would have to do something about that if they were ever to use this power in battle, Harry thought. Draco couldn't just abandon his body in the middle of the field, or someone would hex or kill him as he lay helpless.

Carefully, Draco reached out. Harry didn't know exactly what he was doing until his own hand rose into his field of vision. He certainly hadn't commanded it to do that. He breathed tightly, and knew that reaction, at least, was entirely his.

Draco moved his hand towards his face. Harry thought he was trying to make him scratch his nose.

Let him. It's all right. You trust him, don't you? And you know that he wouldn't hurt you. This is nothing like being bound in a web. This is more like being tangled in a net and trusting Draco to get you down.

Save that, this time, Draco was the one who had put him in the net, too. The fist-like pressure on his brain grew worse, as if Draco were gripping and squeezing some of his thoughts. Harry narrowed his focus to his breathing.

His hand scratched his nose on the second try; before that, it had almost poked him in the eye. Draco lowered it back to his side, and made Harry's throat swallow. Harry beat down the reflex of his Occlumency shields to grab Draco and throw him out of his head.

Tentatively, Harry's body took one step forward.

His right foot came down wrong, Draco obviously used to using a slightly longer leg, and he sprawled on the carpet. Harry lost control of his reflexes, and abruptly he was alone in his head save for the slight warm presence of Fawkes's bond, panting, while Draco's body shook, nearly sprawled itself, and then straightened with a gasp that indicated Draco was back in possession of his own mind.

He turned his head away, looking miserable. Harry took a moment to recover, then went over to him and hugged him tightly. Draco squeaked a bit as the air went out of his lungs, then relaxed and hugged Harry back.

"You don't—blame me for that?" he whispered.

"Of course not," said Harry. "It'll just take a little more time than we thought to work up to walking, that's all." He smiled as Draco huffed indignantly. "Next time, I should be sitting in a chair, and we'll have you try other, smaller steps before you use so many of my muscles at once."

"I could feel you fighting," said Draco. "You didn't like it. You don't like being held and restrained."

"Well, no," Harry admitted, memories of being strapped down on the stone in the graveyard flashing through his head. "But that doesn't mean that I can't tolerate you in my head, Draco. It'll get easier with time. I'll relax and trust you even more than I do."

Draco looked at him thoughtfully. Then, without speaking, he reached out and ran his hand down Harry's cheek. Harry blinked at him in confusion. There didn't seem to be any particular reason to do that. Granted, he couldn't feel Draco's emotions or even his presence in his head now, but he thought he could guess reasons for a shared touch pretty well.

Draco stepped behind him. Harry tensed, but waited. This was a silent test of trust, too, he thought. He didn't believe Draco would ever stab him in the back, either figuratively or literally.

Fingers ran up Harry's spine, then down and along his sides. Harry squirmed, but waited again. There surely had to be more to it than this. When Draco reached the point, then he would know what it was.

Draco leaned in and gently breathed on the back of his neck, then tightened his arms around Harry's waist and moved his hair so that it brushed Harry's. Harry shivered. The pressure was on the brink of turning into something else, something that he found harder to tolerate—

Something he couldn't tolerate. He abruptly broke away from Draco and whirled around. Draco didn't appear alarmed. He was only watching Harry, and nodding as if he had expected this.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Something I'd suspected for a while, but not known for certain until I was in your head," said Draco calmly. "It wasn't really *me* making you uncomfortable, Harry, or even the fact of someone controlling your body. You were all right with that until I made you fall and your reflexes kicked in. It was the way you felt it. A touch."

"Yes. So?" Harry folded his arms, feeling his panic subside as quickly as it had come. He didn't really understand the reaction, either, but he didn't think it important to talk about.

“You’re not comfortable with my touching you,” said Draco. “You put up with it. But when it turns pleasurable...” He shrugged, as if Harry should know exactly what he was talking about from those few clues.

Harry waited. Draco waited, and stared at him.

“I don’t *understand*.” Harry was aware that he was whining like a child, but he couldn’t help it. Draco wasn’t explaining this at all well. He turned away and stalked over to the far side of Draco’s bedroom, scowling at the door.

“You’re afraid of things that feel good,” said Draco, as if he were discussing the weather. “I suppose that’s only natural, Harry, after all the training your mother put you through. But it’s something damaging, something I don’t think can be allowed to stay the way it is.”

Harry stiffened and glanced over his shoulder. Draco only looked more serene than ever. *How dare he?* “It has to be something else. I would have rooted out that training when I rebuilt my mind.”

“You destroyed what you were aware of, Harry,” said Draco. “And even then, you still have to reinforce what you did with promises and conscious attempts to do better. I know. I read a little about Occlumency and Legilimency last year, when I researched my empathy, remember? You wanted me to learn how to shield. And I read that Legilimency works best with conscious thoughts and memories. You did a great thing, but I don’t think it’s complete yet.”

Harry was quiet. He *could* remember some aspects of his training that he supposed might have caused this, but he wasn’t used to thinking of them that way. The year before Hogwarts, he’d learned to do without things like warmth after it rained, and he knew that he’d dulled the taste of chocolate in his own mouth until he couldn’t understand the fuss others made over Chocolate Frogs. That was just to keep him from being distracted from his task of protecting Connor, though.

He had never thought that it might hinder him from feeling physical pleasure. Of course, he’d never planned on having a lover or spouse, either. There simply wouldn’t be enough time, not with Connor as the focus and center of his life.

And now—

Now, his immediate impulse was to say that there wasn’t time, either. He was a guardian, and a protector, and a teacher, and a *vates*, and a brother, and to some extent the Boy-Who-Lived, and Voldemort’s enemy.

But he knew that wasn’t true, and if it had been, he would never have kissed Draco, would have told him that he loved him but wasn’t in love with him. That would have been lying on a level that Harry, at his least self-aware, didn’t think he could have maintained, because it would cause too much hurt to Draco.

He slowly turned around again. Draco nodded before he could say anything.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “This is part of the pushing I was talking about, Harry. I love competing with you and talking with you and trying to work out possession with you, Merlin knows, but I’d also like to go to bed with you at some point.” He flushed, but didn’t look away. Harry had the impression that he must have practiced these words, to give himself the courage to say them. “I’ll let you think about it. But I’m not going to let you *stop* thinking about it, and I’m not going to give up just because you’re uncomfortable feeling that good for right now.”

Harry stamped on the panic that wanted to well up. He could do this. He *would* do this. What kinds of struggles had he been nerving himself to face when he rebuilt his mind, if not these?

And, on the other side of obligation to Draco and accepting this as a necessity of the bond they would have to have, there was the hope that he really could feel good someday, really do it for his own pleasure. Harry flushed as he thought about it. At least, though, he *was* thinking about it.

That that wasn’t going to be enough...

Well, it just wasn’t.

He met Draco’s eyes and nodded.

Draco smiled at him. “I think I’m going to enjoy those lessons even more than the ones on possession,” he said.

Harry flushed anew, but did his best to smile back.

“Tell me what you’ve been doing this week, Harry.”

That was always the way Elfrida began one of their weekly meetings. This time, though, she’d added a new action, bringing Marian along and placing her gently in Harry’s arms before he could object. Harry dandled her on his knee, blinking into her eyes. Marian already seemed changed from just a few weeks ago. She was more active now, her eyes going in several directions at once, but focusing longer on different things, too. She reached determinedly for his glasses, and Harry had to shift her about a bit to prevent her from reaching them; his hand was fully occupied in holding her head up. Marian stuck her lip out at him with a soft popping noise, as much to say that he was no fun.

Harry looked across the sitting room at Elfrida, who had taken one of the other chairs and was watching him in silent patience. She would be quite happy to go on watching him until Merlin woke, Harry thought.

“Studying, mostly,” said Harry. “And helping Draco study.” He hesitated for a moment, since he wasn’t going to tell Elfrida about the possession gift without Draco’s permission, but he could tell her about other things. “He wants to have some interests independent of me. So I find some books for him, and then he reads them. Sometimes he talks to me about them.” Harry cocked his head to the side, wondering if this was something he could ask Elfrida about. “How did you make sure that you didn’t drown in Adalrico and your children, Mrs. Bulstrode?”

Elfrida smiled. “I built myself around an impulse, Harry. The impulse to protect and to have my way in the house.” She blushed and lowered her eyes. “Of course I didn’t ever try to have my way in public. That wouldn’t be right, for a *puellaris* witch. But no one else in my family has such a strong desire to protect. Adalrico’s genius is for battle, and my girls are, of course, children, and still need protection themselves.” She gave an indulgent glance to Marian.

“And that never discontented you?” Harry asked, unable to imagine it.

“No. But I chose to become a *puellaris* witch. Are you encountering difficulties in trying to make Draco more independent?”

“Yes.” Harry shifted position, and then had to scramble to catch Marian when her legs went in a different direction. She only laughed, as if this were great good fun. “I don’t know how to make sure that I’m not doing things that will influence him unduly. And he wants to achieve ambitions of his own, but as long as he spends all this time with me, can he, ever?”

“I am not lost, though I know many people who would say so,” said Elfrida serenely. “What you must do, Harry, is attend to *his* choices, first and foremost. In the end, if he is not interested in certain things, then he will not choose to be interested in them. And if he chooses to focus most of his being on you, then that is the way it should be.”

Harry frowned. “It sounds like someone choosing to be a slave.”

“Do you think I am?”

Harry shook his head. “No. But you didn’t meet your husband for years, did you, Mrs. Bulstrode? And then you could split your focus between him and your children, when you needed to.” He looked down at Marian in his arms again. He wondered how anyone could *avoid* giving their full attention to a child this young.

Lily did when she raised you. She paid more attention to Dumbledore and the ideals she was sacrificing for.

Harry carefully skirted around the thoughts. They would only lead him to useless blaming of his mother. Sobbing and raging about the past was next to useless. Calm discussion would do the most good.

“All of that is true,” said Elfrida, startling him and pulling his attention back to the present. “But if you truly fear that Draco is too bound to you, drowning in you, as you put it, then only give him the time and space to make his choices. That is all you can do, Harry. Sooner or later, you must stop distrusting someone else’s motives. If Draco chooses to think a good deal of you even after time and space and prompting to do otherwise, then you must trust that that is what he wishes to do.”

It sounded so similar to what he’d said about Draco needing to trust him and stop thinking he always acted out of motives of

sacrifice that Harry flushed. He looked down at Marian, and nodded, and joggled her on his knee.

“Tell me what else you did.” Elfrida’s voice was gentle.

Harry obliged, but wondered, as he always did, what she was getting out of this. He didn’t intend to ask. She had chosen to enter these sessions with him, and he had the feeling that her answer would only make him uncomfortable, in any case.

“How would you handle a battlefield like this?”

Harry leaned forward, intently studying the map Adalrico had put before him. It showed a wide, flat plain, with hills on the eastern edge of it, sloping down to meet the plain. On the west, the grass ended abruptly in a long fall to the seashore. Harry studied it carefully for several minutes, until he could be sure that there were no dots representing trees on the plain, and that the cliffs were too steep to let anyone else attack from that route, unless they were flying.

“As a known battlefield that someone else was trying to invest at the same time, or as ground I could choose?” he asked, glancing up from the map.

Adalrico stood slightly to the right of him, hands folded behind his back and eyes looking at Harry the way Harry had looked at the map. “As ground that you could choose,” he said.

Harry nodded, and let himself get absorbed in the map again. Adalrico had volunteered no more information about why he had chosen to take this teaching up than Elfrida had about their weekly sessions, and Harry supposed he could be contented with the motives he knew. Certainly, teaching him battle strategy could only be a good thing, at least from Adalrico’s point of view.

“I’d have a group of wizards and witches on brooms, ready to come over the cliff, where the enemy wouldn’t be looking,” he said. “Hopefully at noon, when they could dive out of the sun. The enemy would almost have to come out of the east, since the north and the south are too bereft of cover. I’d have prepared the plain with traps—spells designed to go off when someone steps on them, ordinary pit traps and tripwires that can’t be detected with magic, and some harmless attention-getting things like firecrackers, so they’d be off-balance and looking in other directions when we showed up. I’d probably have the army already lying in those areas clear of the traps, with Disillusionment Charms over them. Then they’d stand up and begin the battle the moment the traps started disordering the other side.”

“Why not just Apparate in?” Adalrico argued.

“I’d have spells around the plain already, to take care of Apparition,” said Harry. “Portkeys, too. It’d be difficult to do that if I didn’t know where the battle was going to be, but it’s one of the first steps I’d take the moment we chose the ground, so that our enemies couldn’t just show up beforehand and start harassing us. Force them to come to us at a certain time, too, since we also chose the ground. They’d have to gather their allies first.”

“What if members of your own side started taking heavy casualties? Would you keep the anti-Apparition wards and the other defenses up?”

“For as long as I could,” said Harry, and then an idea that hadn’t shown up before occurred to him. “At least some of the wizards and witches waiting on brooms should be ready to take the wounded out of there. I’d want professional Quidditch players if I could possibly get them, since they’d be able to dodge spells better.”

Adalrico was smiling slightly, but he still looked inclined to argue. “How heavy would the casualties have to be before you dropped the wards and gave the signal to retreat?”

Harry closed his eyes. “Half,” he said. “Most of the time, at least. But it would also depend on how many losses the enemy was taking. If they were taking heavier, then I’d encourage my people to stay and fight them. If not, then we’re not just losing people, but also morale.” He hesitated.

“Say what you’re going to say.”

“And it would depend on if Voldemort was with them,” Harry finished quietly. “He could break most of the spells on the battlefield, and kill people with a single strike.” He braced himself and looked up at Adalrico. “Is it true that you helped him

design the Black Plague spell, sir?"

Adalrico's face tightened for a long moment. Then he let out his breath. "Yes," he said. "That, and other things, to my everlasting shame." He paused, eyeing Harry. "You are asking if he would have a spell like that with him, to try and wipe out all our people?"

"Yes."

"It's possible," said Adalrico quietly. "My guess is that he won't use the Black Plague spell again. The Healers in St. Mungo's have come up with defenses against it, and last time it took us almost a year to grow the—spores it came from. All of those were destroyed or carried off by Death Eaters when our Lord fell." He hesitated, then said, "I retrieved some of them, Harry. Would you—"

"No."

"But you could—"

"No."

Adalrico observed him narrowly for a moment, then shook his head. "You will have to use some spells you don't want to, you know."

"I know," said Harry. "But not the spells that gave people nightmares during the First War. The Black Plague spell destroyed countless lives, countless families, countless Aurors. Most of the people I want to ally with me wouldn't trust me if I used it."

"Most of the Light families won't trust you if you use Dark magic, either." Adalrico folded his arms and studied him disapprovingly. "I think you have turned your back too strongly on sacrifice, Harry. You've decided to use Dark magic. I don't see why this is so different."

"It's the specific *spell*," said Harry calmly. "You said that it would take almost a year to grow the spores—"

"Not in the condition I've preserved them," said Adalrico. "We could have a Plague inside a month."

"It's a spell that's good only for killing," said Harry. "Not for healing, not for growing, not for defending lives. I won't use it for the same reason that I won't use *Cruciatus*. They're cruel and evil without any means of redemption. And what would you say about the person who used them?"

Adalrico's eyes were shuttered. "I would say that there are many people like that in your ranks already, Potter." *Not a good sign that he's retreated to my surname*, Harry thought. "And I wonder how you will deal with having them as allies, if you truly think that some spells are evil and not just Dark."

"Because they are people," said Harry. "Not spells. And people can change their minds. Tell me, Adalrico. Is it a *surprise* to you that I won't manufacture a Plague? That I would try to kill the Death Eaters only if I had to, bind them and bring them to a fair trial if I could, rather than just damning them with Voldemort?"

"Yes," said Adalrico. "It is. I have seen more of your practical and pureblood side than your moral side, Potter. I thought you understood war better than this. You should use every advantage you have."

"Only the ones that actually are advantages, not disadvantages that would prejudice some of my allies against me," said Harry. "I won't pay as high a price as I would have to for that single spell. I want to end the War, of course, but I don't think you really understand me. *Speed* isn't the most important factor. I don't want to engender bitterness that would grow against me like the bitterness that's grown against Voldemort and Dumbledore. They both did what's efficient instead of what's right. I won't."

Adalrico shook his head and turned away. "Some of your allies will not accept this," he said in a warning voice.

Harry waited until he turned around again. Then he said, in a measured voice, holding Adalrico's eyes all the while, "I am more than what my allies think of me, or even what the magical creatures think of me. I have my own goals, and my own things that I won't do. For example, some of my allies are going to be Muggleborn."

Perhaps it was just because Harry was watching for it, but he saw the expression of disgust flash across Adalrico's face.

Harry nodded. "Think about the reasons you hate them. Really, truly think about them. You've come up with clever arguments why someone shouldn't be prejudiced against you just because you were a Death Eater, or because you're a pureblood, or a Dark wizard. Now turn that around and apply it to the Muggleborns." Deciding he'd said all he could for right now, he turned and walked to the door of the small room Lucius had set aside for these weekly lessons.

"Some of us will need better answers than that," said Adalrico to his back.

Harry turned around. "And some of you will have to learn to live with what you get," he said gently, and then left the room.

"I have an aunt in France. I could go to her."

Harry leaned back and looked hard at Vince for a moment. Vince didn't meet his eyes. He was staring around the library instead, his expression set in misery, but his gaze seemingly unable to rest in one place.

"All right," said Harry quietly. He ignored Draco's shifting behind him. Harry and Vince were both sitting. Draco had insisted on standing. Harry wished he wouldn't, since he thought that was increasing Vince's nervousness, but he understood. Draco still didn't think that Vince was an innocent victim, and judging from the binding charms that Lucius and Narcissa had put on him when they arrived back at the Manor—charms that wouldn't allow him to do magic or wear any glamours as long as he was inside its walls—neither did they.

"It's no trouble," Vince whispered. "She can help me. She would have helped me, if she knew I was in trouble. But the letters I sent to her never made it. Only the one I sent to you did." He stared hopelessly, appealingly, at Harry, and then looked away again. "And I thought my father didn't find that one. Now I knew that he was trying to trap you, hoping you would arrange to meet me somewhere."

Harry inclined his head. "I knew that."

Vince stared at him, and Draco pressed down on his shoulder. "You *did*?" Vince asked in bewilderment.

"Of course," said Harry. "Even if your letter got out without being noticed, I didn't think mine would get in without your father seeing it. But I couldn't think of any other way to get you to meet me. I didn't know where you lived, and I don't think your father would have let you send a Floo name."

Vince shook his head, then rubbed his face with one hand. Harry didn't think he'd been sleeping well. Apart from the battle and the fact that he could have died, there was the distrust from the Malfoys and the idea that his father had been quite willing to sacrifice him, Harry thought. That had to hurt.

"No," Vince whispered. "He wouldn't."

"Are you going to be all right?" Harry asked.

"Yes," said Vince, with emphasis. "I'll go to Beauxbatons. It'll be lots better than Durmstrang." He looked at Harry again. "Thank you for saving my life."

It occurred to Harry, then, something he should have asked much earlier. "What about your mother, Vince? Does she need to be rescued, too?" Draco seemed as if he were now intent on grinding the bones in his shoulder together. Harry ignored him as best he could. This time, the rescue would be a lot less risky. Vince could give them details of the house and the best way to go in.

"No," Vince whispered. "She went away when You-Know-Who called my father back. I went into her bedroom when I came home from school, and it was just—abandoned. I don't know where she went. Maybe to my aunt. She's her sister."

Harry nodded, concealing his contempt for a woman who would run and abandon her own son like that. He hardly had space to talk about motherly behavior. "All right, then. When do you want to go to your aunt's house?"

"I'll owl her today."

Harry waited patiently for more, but Vince had lapsed into silence again, staring at things only he could see. Harry had to lean forward, feeling inexplicably like Madam Shiverwood as he did so, and ask quietly, “Vince? What happened? Can you speak about the things your father did to you?”

“It wasn’t anything too bad,” said Vince quickly, and rubbed at his eyes as if he were tired—or about to cry. “Just *Imperio* a few times, really, and talking about how I was going to become a Death Eater and have to kill D-Draco. He was trying to convert me before he tortured me.” He shut his eyes. “I was just too afraid, and I didn’t know how I would get away when I went to Durmstrang. The D-Death Eaters are strong there.”

Harry nodded, remembering Karkaroff’s claim that a nest of fledgling Death Eaters were in the school. “I can understand that.” He hesitated again, then said, “And there’s nothing I can do for you before you go to your aunt’s?”

“No,” Vince whispered. “I know it doesn’t sound like much.” He said those words in a loud, abrupt voice, and stared at Draco as he said them. “Compared to what you’ve survived, I mean. But I was so terrified. I woke up and I went to bed in fear. My mother was gone, and my father was changed, and of course the house elves were no help. I had no one to depend on. I knew writing to you was risky, Harry, but it was the only thing I could think of.”

“I understand,” said Harry. And he did. People had different breaking points. Other people would have gone mad after the graveyard, and other people wouldn’t have got quite so jumpy when Draco touched them. “I hope you’ll be happy at your aunt’s, Vince. I’ll let you use Hedwig to write her.”

Vince nodded to him, and then stood and walked unsteadily out of the library. Harry watched him until the door closed behind him, bringing the lecture that he expected from Draco.

“You can’t trust him, Harry. He could *still* be lying, or maybe his father put him under Imperius and sent him here to do something.”

“Your father’s had the house elves watching him,” said Harry. “Are you saying that they wouldn’t have noticed evidence of things like that? Or that Vince is a good enough wizard to break your mother’s and father’s spells?” He leaned back and looked up at Draco, who pressed his lips together.

“No. Of course not. But—it just isn’t *right*, that’s all. Why did his father bring him along to Diagon Alley at all?”

“Because he wanted to torture him, I think,” said Harry quietly. “And me, with the knowledge of my not being able to save him. Besides, remember that one of the Death Eaters acted like he wanted to capture me, and another like he wanted to hurt me. I think there are divisions in the Death Eaters, Draco.”

As he had hoped, that got Draco off the subject of suspicions about Vince, suspicions that Harry saw no use in entertaining until metallic proof of them showed up. “Really?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Some of them would be happy with Voldemort, but others wouldn’t. And then he dueled me, and got crippled. I think some of them will be less than impressed with *that*. Then there’s Rosier turning. That might have put the thought into some others’ minds. And their positions have changed, now. Some of them have different lives, where their Death Eater affiliation can’t be suspected without its destroying them, and some of them won’t be happy that Karkaroff has such a good position with Voldemort now. These Death Eaters aren’t the same ones the Aurors faced in the First War.”

Draco settled down to listen happily to Harry’s tales of what he thought might happen, which Harry could speak in his sleep; they were largely what he’d thought of while lying awake at night. Meanwhile, his thoughts dwelled on Vince, and the thought of waking up and going to bed in fear, while a father he’d always loved did incomprehensible things to him, in the name of an even more incomprehensible loyalty.

I can only hope that he finds life in France happier.

Harry woke.

He opened his eyes slowly. He already knew that what woke him was nothing so ordinary as a knock at the door or a vision from

Voldemort, or even Argutus slithering across him in an attempt to get warm. The room was full of the feeling of powerful magic, surging and breathing out like mist, like light.

Harry lay still, waiting. Whatever the magic was, he thought it would reveal itself sooner or later.

It did, coalescing near the foot of his bed, light after mote of light winging in and then becoming part of the body of something golden. Harry stared, wondering for a moment how the creature could have a cruel, curved beak and yet four legs. Then it turned its head and stared at him, and he realized it was a gryphon.

The gryphon came slowly forward on its lion-like legs, and stood staring down at him with fierce, eagle eyes, wings half-spread. Harry met its gaze. He didn't think it was a real gryphon—they were considerably bigger—but he longed to know what it was, and why it would have chosen to take the form of a gryphon.

The gryphon opened its beak, and breath deep and sweet as a roll in a meadow of summer flowers bathed Harry's face.

The breath did not carry words with it, nor visions like the ones that Fawkes's songs inspired, but Harry understood it nonetheless. This gryphon was a part of the Light magic that Voldemort had done a deep injury with his enslaving of the Midsummer sunset. It had finally risen in enough majesty and anger to pay him back, and it insisted that Harry come with it and see what that entailed.

Harry swallowed slightly. He understood that this was a command, not a request, and thoughts of delaying or asking for Draco to come along with them dissolved from his tongue. The Light magic was taking only him, though the gryphon eyed Argutus tolerantly when he climbed to Harry's left shoulder and coiled fiercely around his neck.

The raptor's beak descended, large enough to split open his skull in a single driving blow, and gently clamped around his waist. Harry was lifted irresistibly into the air, and then deposited on the gryphon's back, just where eagle feathers melted into leonine fur. He settled down, shivering a bit, but only in surprise. Unlike riding a broom, this was deeply warm.

The gryphon sprang into the air. Harry worried for a moment how it would get out of the Manor, and what the effects on the Manor might be of it spreading its wings inside such a small room as the one he had—

And then found he need not have worried. The magic that had him now was at least the equivalent of the wild Darkness of Walpurgis Night, but it was present in greater amounts and in different places. Light surrounded them, and tugged them, and Harry realized they were hurtling along beneath the stars, hundreds of feet off the ground, the dark mass of Britain passing beneath them. He saw how each individual starbeam slanted down to make the gryphon's wings, how it changed in color from gold to silver, and shivered again at the knowledge that only starlight was holding him up. He hoped no clouds came to cover it.

He need not have worried, though. The gryphon was faster than any cloud, and this was a clear summer night. It moved rapidly to the north, and then turned in a direction Harry still thought, though he was dazed by the speed, was west, from the moon. Still they rode from star to star, reformed and recreated from moment to moment. Harry felt the power surging around him all the while. Just because the Light magic chose to use its powers to create a steed and bear him along right now did not mean it wasn't mighty. Indeed, Harry thought that in some ways that the restraint holding it back, confining it to a human scale for the moment, was stronger than the wildness he had witnessed on Walpurgis Night.

Then they slanted down, falling rapidly past trees, and into rolling hills. Harry saw the shape of a house up ahead.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters were outside the house, standing around a blazing bonfire. Voldemort was laughing, and his own power rose around him, a deadly blot on the night.

The gryphon tucked its talons close to its breast. Harry realized they were about to hurtle downwards just in time to ready himself for it, the way that he would when diving on a broom.

The gryphon stooped in at a sharp angle, so sharp that few of the Death Eaters looked up in time to see it come. Of course, few people looked overhead anyway, Harry found. They ducked and cried out once they saw what it was, and Harry saw Voldemort alone calmly hold out his wand and cast a spell, the sound of which was lost in the screams and cries from around him.

The gryphon snapped its head forward, and the beak closed on a tendril of power just extending from Voldemort. Harry held on as the gryphon wheeled hard to the side, talons scraping through the top of the bonfire, drawing substance and strength from the light of the flames.

Magic unraveled from Voldemort along the path of that one trailing thread, and Harry watched in wonder mingled with fear as Voldemort began to lose more and more of the dark aura that had hovered around him. The gryphon rose higher, wings beating madly, scattering sparks from beneath it and starting small fires in the grass, which only built the gryphon's shape as the brightness built. Magic swirled around it, and Harry caught a sense of it, foul and perverted, just like all the power he had ever swallowed from Voldemort had tasted.

The gryphon swallowed it, and then spread its wings wider. The power unspooled from them, cleaned by the passage through its body. It didn't flow back to Voldemort, though, but soared up to the sky, in springing waterfalls and fountains that reminded Harry of the waterfalls and fountains of light when the unicorns were freed. The magic flew back towards the stars, the sun, the moon, the places it had come from first, before Voldemort did whatever he had done to steal it from the Light.

The gryphon had taken only as much magic from Voldemort as he stole, Harry thought, as they swung around again and then took off, soaring upward. It would not care to do more, because its sense of justice was strict. It would answer the crimes against itself. Others must claim their own share of justice. The Light could not judge for them.

Rather like me, with my parents and Dumbledore, Harry thought, driving his hand deeper into the fur and feathers as they flew. The Death Eaters were crying behind them. Voldemort was not dead, but he had been crippled. Harry found himself smiling. He could hope that this would produce even more divisions within their ranks, as some of them rallied around their Lord and others began to see him as weak—and Dark wizards and witches were not forgiving of weakness.

The gryphon soared from star to star, and it was not long before they reached Malfoy Manor again, and passed in that same ephemeral manner from the light of the stars to the soft moonlight falling through Harry's window. He landed softly in his own bed, lowered by the beak as he had been lifted, and stared into the gryphon's intense eyes.

"How did Voldemort get that magic in the first place?" he whispered. "What did he do?"

The gryphon breathed over his face again, and the answer came to Harry. Voldemort had pretended to be conducting the truce-dance with a being who stood high in the Light, rather like the house elves had once been, using illusion and glamour spells he'd produced even before his fall and had his Death Eaters add to. Pleased by the thought of one of their own dealing with him, and by the thought of a powerful Dark wizard turning to the Light, the ancient rituals had answered, giving him power linked to the sun and the solstices and equinoxes. The linkage to time they could not take back; Voldemort would keep on performing his corrupted truce-dance, sending gifts to the illusionary being at the proper times, and that meant he would gain the closeness to the seasons that any wizard in a similar ritual would. But they could take back the Light magic he had stolen and put to twisted uses, the magic that had kept Harry's own wandless power imprisoned in the graveyard.

Voldemort was still likely to time his attacks on the solstices and equinoxes, Harry understood, following the round of the sun. But the stolen magic meant his raids would no longer be the devastating force they could have been. He could no longer will something to happen at the moment of sunset as he had in the graveyard.

There was still Dark magic rising, still a storm coming, not least because the Dark magic *did* remember Voldemort's attempt to cage it at Walpurgis Night, and would not be so forgiving as the Light had been. Harry must watch out at Midsummer, of course, but Midwinter would be worst and wildest, the shortest day, the longest night, the night when the storm of unleashed Dark magic would come for Voldemort—and anyone else who might happen to be standing in its way.

And it would be worse than usual, because there would be no moon on that solstice, no light to counteract the Dark influence. Harry must watch out.

Harry blinked, and there was no gryphon standing in his room, only the moonlight. He let out a deep breath and rolled over, trying to think of what he should do.

For now, he decided at last, go back to sleep. He would wake and confirm the information, and decide what to do with it, in the morning.

"*That was fascinating,*" Argutus said.

Harry jumped, sending his snake to the bed. He'd forgotten that Argutus was there. "You enjoyed it?" he asked.

"*Yes. I like it. You are interesting, and you are around interesting things and forces. Interesting things happen to you.*" Argutus

lifted his head back up and touched his tongue to the stump of Harry's left hand. "*I like you. I choose you to be my friend.*"

Harry smiled, extended his arm for the Omen snake to climb up, and rolled over so that both his arms rested on his stomach. For right now, sharp, piercing exhaustion made him too tired for any grander gesture.

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

Chapter Sixteen: Guilty Until Proven Innocent

Harry grimaced in resignation as Lucius escorted him into the Ministry, one hand planted firmly on his back. Madam Shiverwood had sent an owl yesterday, "inviting" him to come see her today and have his second interrogation—what she would probably call a little talk. Narcissa, however, was gone this morning, talking to Henrietta Bulstrode, probably to answer some subtle questions about whether Harry was up to the ability of leading.

Harry wished he could have gone with her. Facing Henrietta Bulstrode was nothing next to facing Madam Shiverwood.

That left only Lucius to take him to the Ministry, of course, because everyone in the Manor had only given Harry a chilly stare when he suggested that he be allowed to go alone. Harry had bowed his head and not objected, but his heart boiled with objections. What good would one more hostage do in a battle? Voldemort or his Death Eaters could target the people who came with Harry in the sure and certain knowledge that he would die before he permitted them to be hurt. Harry didn't see why he shouldn't be allowed to go alone, and if Voldemort or the Death Eaters showed up to fight him again, then that was their problem, and his.

They went straight to the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, Lucius exchanging a few cool nods with those he passed. Harry watched him in amusement, to distract his mind from the upcoming questioning. Lucius had lost prestige in the Ministry when Fudge turned so hysterically to the Light, and the fact that the new Minister was Light-devoted also wouldn't help him much. But even now there were people who might listen to money, Harry supposed, if not the words of a Dark wizard. And Scrimgeour wouldn't mind that, even though he might mind Lucius, because Lucius was not a Lord and bribery was one of the means that ordinary wizards used to get things done. He would think it his duty to purge his Ministry of people who could be bribed.

"Here we are." Lucius halted before Madam Shiverwood's door. "I trust that you will emerge from your talk at eleven o'clock, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, and sighed, and put his hand on the door.

This time, though it swung open on the same room, it didn't swing open on the same expression. Madam Shiverwood straightened behind her desk and eyed him sternly.

"Harry," she said, with a brisk nod. "Please sit down."

Harry took the chair in front of her desk, observing her thoughtfully. Her eyes tracked his every movement. She had her hands folded, and if anything, they only clamped more tightly on each other as she stared at him. She coughed, and while it was a gentle cough, Harry didn't think that it marked any gentleness in store for him. Her eyes were too sharp for that.

"Please shut the door," she said.

Harry gestured, and his wandless magic pushed the office door shut on Lucius's distantly amused face.

"Yes, well." Madam Shiverwood shuffled the papers across her desk for a moment, then leaned forward. "I have learned more about the abuse that you suffered, Harry. I have seen all the memories in the Pensieve now, as well as read the reports." She paused a moment, her nostrils flaring, and then said, "Why didn't you *tell* anyone?"

Harry didn't know what had changed, but he found that he liked this new Madam Shiverwood better. She was certainly off balance, and she seemed to be less intelligent. Perhaps it was just seeing the memories that had disconcerted her. Still, he planned to take advantage of it. "Because my mother made sure the thought would never occur to me, madam," he said. "She told me that it had to stay secret, so that no one would ever find out that Connor couldn't do everything himself. And then she told me that no one outside the family would understand. They would say it was evil, but they would never understand how it looked to someone who was actually part of our family." *And that part is still true.* "Besides, I never thought of it as abuse at the time."

“Still, though, what she did to you—“ Madam Shiverwood’s hands clenched on her papers. “When did you first start thinking of it as abuse?”

Harry tried to think. The word had occurred to him at the end of his second year, he thought, during those terrible moments in the Chamber of Secrets when the box had burst open and his silent self had eaten part of Voldemort’s magic. “A few months before I turned thirteen,” he said quietly.

“And it *still* didn’t occur to you to tell anyone?” Madam Shiverwood’s voice was shrill.

“No, for the reasons I laid out to you.” Harry shuffled around in his seat so that he was facing Madam Shiverwood more directly. His chair was still lower than her desk, which he didn’t like, but he was going to make sure that he held every advantage he could. “Why is this so hard to understand?” he added. “Last time, you seemed to know me better than I knew myself.”

“You were abused for so long,” said Madam Shiverwood softly, her hands now clenching on the edges of the desk. “I’m merely trying to understand how you could have reached the age of fourteen before it was reported.”

Harry felt a stirring of impatience. *Well, if she’s acting irrational, then she can’t use my own supposed irrationality against me.* “I didn’t want anyone to report it,” he said. “If I had my way, it would never have been reported. I can handle forgiving my parents and Dumbledore. There was no reason for anyone else to intrude into what was a private matter of forgiveness and reconciliation.”

“It’s not just about those!” Madam Shiverwood leaned forward across the desk as if she were going to lunge at him. “It’s about justice, and punishment, and seeing that those who hurt you get their due, Harry. Don’t you care that your parents would still have been walking about, free to do whatever they wanted, including hurting you again?”

“If they had hurt someone else, that would have been my fault, and I would have borne the guilt of it,” said Harry, sitting up in the chair and lifting his chin. “If they hurt me, then I could also bear that. I expected a few more wounds before I could heal them.”

“The burden of healing them should never have been up to you,” said Madam Shiverwood, softly again, and then looked away from him. Harry saw her wiping tears from her eyes with the corner of one sleeve, and stared. *She really is getting too upset. She has to have the ability to stand back from this.*

“Has something happened, Madam Shiverwood?” he asked, as gently as he could. “Do you need me to leave?”

Madam Shiverwood blinked at him. “I am crying over you,” she said. “You don’t seem inclined to shed tears over your own situation.” Her eyes were fastened to his face as if nailed there again. “Have you done as I asked, indulging one pleasure or one whim of your own every day?”

Harry flushed, and knew that was answer enough.

“Harry.” She whispered his name. “Why?”

“It’s stupid,” said Harry flatly. “It doesn’t have anything to do with healing me. And I can’t—” He stopped. What he was going to say next sounded stupid, but then, Madam Shiverwood was already upset. If he said it now, it would just be stupidity and not weakness in front of her, the way it would have been otherwise. “I can’t think of that many things I want,” he finished.

Madam Shiverwood’s eyes grew more alert, though also, Harry thought, brighter with the sheen of tears. She drew a piece of parchment and a quill from her desk drawers and pushed them across the desk to him. Harry sat where he was and made no move to take them, staring at her all the while.

“Make a list of things you like,” she said patiently, as though she had already given him the instructions once. “Then we can work out ways for you to have them.”

Harry snorted, but leaned forward and floated the parchment and quill to him, bracing them on his leg as he used his hand to write. He saw Madam Shiverwood’s eyes dart to the stump of his left wrist, and that same stricken look come over her face. *Why? It’s not like she had anything to do with the loss of it, and if she’s pitying me for losing it, then I may just have to kick her.* He lowered his head and began to scribble hard on the parchment.

Helping people.
Healing people.
Giving other people what they want.

After that, it grew harder. Harry hesitated, toying with the quill, and wondered what else he liked and wanted. Oh, of course.

Freeing magical creatures.
Breaking webs.

After that...well. Harry frowned at the parchment, and wondered if he really needed to write down anything else. There were some very minor pleasures that he indulged in sometimes, but a lot of them could be filed under one of those he'd already written. He heard Madam Shiverwood shifting and starting to draw in her breath, though, so he began writing hastily.

Brewing potions.
Flying.

He added that second one reluctantly. Except when he'd flown on his broom to stop the dragons last year, or tired to throw the Quidditch games for Connor, he couldn't really think of a time he'd used his flying to *help* people. That made it the exact kind of pleasure that Madam Shiverwood wanted him to list, of course, but all it felt to him was wasteful. Harry didn't think he'd be playing Quidditch this year. Why should he? He had other things to do, and catching the Snitch was a small rush of pleasure compared to the time that training took up.

He handed the parchment back to Madam Shiverwood, and she looked over it in silence. To Harry's irritation, she looked as if she were about to start crying again.

She glanced up at Harry, wiping her cheeks, and said, "We must try to get you a few more selfish pleasures, that's all."

"I don't see why." Harry shifted from side to side in the chair, and wished that he were alone. "If I'm supposed to be recovering from abuse, shouldn't I think about that instead?"

"Because of the unusual circumstances of your case, this *does* qualify as helping you to recover from abuse," said Madam Shiverwood gently. "I want you to be able to enjoy things for themselves, Harry, or for yourself. Your mother trained you to hate good things—"

"Not hate them," Harry interrupted, thinking this was an important distinction. Otherwise, they might try Lily for something she hadn't really done. "Just do without them. And sometimes panic if someone tries to introduce them to me too insistently." He thought uneasily about the tickling session that Draco had put him through last night. It had been all right until Draco's hands lingered on his skin too long, and then the fear had surged up inside him again.

But that's Draco's province to help me recover from. Not Madam Shiverwood's. Harry folded his arms and stared stubbornly at her.

"That is worse," said Madam Shiverwood quietly. "She has made a fifteen-year-old boy incapable of thinking about having fun." She considered his list again. "From now on, Harry, I want you to do at least one thing every day that pleases you and does not involve helping someone else."

"I can't brew potions or fly every day," Harry protested.

"For now, you can," said Madam Shiverwood, and then sighed. "Although why I should expect you to obey me now, when you didn't last time, and you no longer seem as eager about healing from abuse as you were..."

"I *am* eager," Harry said. *She really just doesn't understand.* "I do want to heal. But I can't afford to do it in a way that takes up too much time. Lots of people are depending on me." That ought not to surprise her, at least, if she'd seen the newspaper articles that the *Prophet* was publishing.

"Healing should be your most important priority right now, Harry," said Madam Shiverwood. "Other people will understand if you have to wait to help them. And it's the most important thing I can do, too."

There is something strange happening here, though I don't know what memory or magic could have caused it. Harry leaned back

in his chair. “But you don’t just handle my case, madam. You handle others. I don’t think you’ll do a service to other abused children by concentrating so hard on me.”

“Right now, the other cases do not need so much of my personal involvement,” said Madam Shiverwood. “The children involved have good relationships with their guardians, or with the parent who did not abuse them, or with other relatives. You have no one who is connected to you in that way, Harry, except your guardian—“

“He’s not my guardian by choice,” said Harry shortly, feeling those uncontrollable emotions that boiled up in him whenever he thought about Snape. But Snape wasn’t here right now, and he would make himself look a fool if he went on about him in front of Madam Shiverwood. After some deep breathing, he managed to calm down and stare her in the eye. “I tried to ask the Minister to strip him of his guardianship. He wouldn’t do it.”

“You need caring adults about you, Harry,” said Madam Shiverwood. “That is becoming quite clear. If the Minister refused to take the office away from Severus Snape, I can only assume that he thinks the man is doing a good job.”

“A good job driving me mad,” Harry muttered.

“Why?”

Harry peeked at her from the corner of one eye. *This is just the kind of thing she wants to hear about, probably. Well, if I tell it to her, then maybe I can convince her that I do want to heal. The things she recommends that I do just aren’t useful, that’s all, and take up too much time.*

“He probably knows me better than any other adult,” Harry admitted grudgingly. “He’s rescued me and saved me numerous times, and he doubtless thought he was doing it again.” Harry ducked his head, so that the expression in his eyes wouldn’t be as visible. “But because he knows me, he knew that I wouldn’t forgive him for exposing my parents and Dumbledore to abuse charges. For other crimes, crimes that wouldn’t have destroyed them, yes. I could understand why he would do that. But not this kind of crime. Not this kind of charge. It’s—what he did is inhuman, and he shouldn’t have done it, not when he knows I wouldn’t like it.”

“Then does that mean a guardian should only do what a child likes?” Madam Shiverwood asked, mild again.

Damn. I never saw that one coming. “No,” Harry said. “But that’s not the point. The point is that other children need guardians like that, because they can’t take care of themselves or deal with the adults who hurt them on their own. Snape knows I could have. That just makes what he’s done all the more unforgivable.”

“You can forgive your parents, and yet you cannot forgive him?”

“They don’t know me,” said Harry impatiently. “They only know the boy they think I am, the child they believed they created. Snape knows *me*, and he went ahead and did it anyway.”

“That suggests, to me,” said Madam Shiverwood, folding her hands in front of her again, “that he was prepared to lose your love, and even your forgiveness, for the sake of seeing you safe. He took a great risk with this. You might have destroyed him, or done worse than yell at him, thanks to your magic and your raw emotions. You certainly have turned your back on him. But he will live to see you safe, even if it is not with him. That bespeaks a great love to me. If he does know you better than your parents, as you said he does, then he put the knowledge to good use.”

“If he really does love me, then he would have let me deal with this on my own,” said Harry. “He knew how badly I wanted to.” He was not going to admit that Madam Shiverwood might have a point. Of course, that didn’t prevent him from knowing what would come out of her mouth next.

“And being a guardian is not about indulging all a child’s whims,” she said gently. She leaned back in her chair and studied him. “I would also like you to think about Professor Snape, Harry,” she added. “It’s obvious that you haven’t, that you’ve pushed aside your emotions. Otherwise, I think you would be able to argue better for or against him than this.”

Harry swallowed, and felt as if there were knives in his throat. “And what should I think about, madam? Making him dangle by one hand over a pit of snakes until he apologizes to my parents and Dumbledore?”

“If that is what it takes to make you work through your emotions,” said Madam Shiverwood. “Understand, Harry. I am not saying

that you must forgive him. I am only asking you to think about it. You have not done it, and it is obvious that that is slowing you down, and making you clumsy in your emotional responses to him. Healing from the wounds you believe that he inflicted on you is just another part of the healing process. Think about him, imagine conversations with him, dangle him above a snake pit if you must. I know that you are going back to school soon. How will you deal with him then, if you cannot deal with talking about him now?"

Harry had been wondering the same thing, in the back of his mind. But there were so many other things to think about—especially when he was at Malfoy Manor, and Draco was close by—that he tended to let it glide out of his mind, like flowing water. He sighed, and admitted she might have a point.

"All right, madam. I'll try."

Madam Shiverwood nodded, satisfied. "And what about indulging one pleasure or whim each day?"

Harry frowned at her. "I feel like I'm a little kid, and you're telling me to go play outside."

"I am not doing that, Harry, unless you wish to be outside," said Madam Shiverwood. "I am encouraging you to go and have fun."

"That sounds even more childish," Harry complained.

Madam Shiverwood shook her head slightly. "And if you have looked into the *Prophet*, you will have noticed that you are a child to many people," she said. "It is time that you learned to use that, Harry, instead of being difficult about it. If you do want to be more than an abused child, then you should be seizing this chance to grow past it, to learn to have fun and accept pleasure so that you can be a true adult. Unless you think that adults give up all chance of fun and pleasure when they turn eighteen?" she added, and Harry didn't want to oblige her with a smile, but couldn't quite resist.

"I suppose," he said. He didn't say it, but there was another reason that indulging himself could get to be a bad habit. What if he indulged himself the night before a battle, or when Voldemort made a sudden and violent move against the wizarding world? Then he might not have the concentration and emotional control that he needed in order to be ready for circumstances like that.

"I know it," said Madam Shiverwood. "I would like you to write down your promise this time, Harry, and sign your name to it. Or your promises, rather, since I would also like you think about your guardian." She pushed the parchment and quill back towards him.

Reluctantly, but cheered at the thought of actually pushing these stupid, crippling things behind him, Harry took up the parchment and wrote.

Lucius did not idle outside the door once he had given Harry over into Madam Shiverwood's tender care. He strolled down the hall, instead, reached the lifts, and casually took them to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

A few people stared at him as he walked in, but most of them didn't look up from their paperwork, or prudently pretended not to catch his eye. Lucius had a few friends here. Up until a year and a half ago, before Fudge's little attack of paranoia, he had even been a common sight on some days. Lucius didn't let either the stares or the carefully averted eyes bother him, of course, as he walked casually to the door of his closest friend in the Ministry and knocked.

Time to renew an old acquaintance.

The door opened almost at once. It was warded to do that if the person who knocked was one that Aurelius Flint trusted. Lucius didn't know what happened if someone knocked whom he distrusted. Perhaps it blew up in their faces. Aurelius was disturbingly good with hexes.

"Lucius," said Aurelius, looking up and regarding him with flat, blank black eyes. Lucius had to admire the man's control. It was like being looked at by a beetle. Not nearly as charming as Lucius's own coldness, of course, which he could adjust by several degrees of warmth as the situation required, but Aurelius didn't work in a position where he needed the charm. He was, to most appearances, merely a minor paper-pusher in his Department. To those who looked with knowing eyes, he was a source of information, a node in the web where many strands met. "What can I do for you?"

“Many things,” said Lucius, and heard the door shut behind him. He sat down in front of Aurelius’s desk, easy, not afraid, though he knew he was in a room the man sitting opposite him had covered with death traps. “For starters, do you know how closely allied I am to the Potters?”

Only a flicker in the deep eyes showed that that wasn’t the question Aurelius was expecting. He sat back, though, and slung a leg over his desk, as casual as Lucius was. “Your son’s pretty close friends with their older boy, I hear.”

Lucius smiled. “Not just friends, Aurelius. They’ll be joined one day.”

“Who told you that? Boys never know their own feelings at that age.” Aurelius was grimacing, no doubt remembering the disastrous marriage he’d nearly entered when he was sixteen. Lucius still thought it was the funniest story he’d ever heard.

“Narcissa.”

After a moment’s consideration, Aurelius inclined his head in acceptance. “And you want to see your in-laws, or the people who will be your in-laws, and congratulate them on having produced a son who can expect to be allied with a Malfoy?” he asked.

Lucius leaned closer. “Well, not *congratulate* them. That would be rather too strong a word. But I do think that we should be in communication. After all, I’ve never had a chance to talk to Lily or James Potter since we fought on opposite sides in that large misunderstanding of the War, when I was under Imperius.” Aurelius’s smile at that would have done a shark credit, Lucius thought. “Who can help me with that?”

Aurelius closed his eyes, no doubt rifling through the mental files in his head. It was remarkable, Lucius thought, how he kept the information organized like that. He never wrote anything about his contacts down, because he didn’t need to. That, of course, contributed greatly to his not getting caught. He would know who could be bribed, who was in desperate need of a favor, who was on the brink of getting sacked for drinking, but he wouldn’t have so much as a scrap of a note bearing that person’s name anywhere in his office.

“Richard Nott,” said Aurelius, opening his eyes. “He has a contact who’s rotating as a guard on the Potter cells.”

“And what would Nott want?” Lucius asked, cocking an eyebrow. He remembered Richard. A disappointment to his family when he became an Auror, especially when his first adventure in the field resulted in him acquiring a wound that couldn’t be completely healed, and put him in the Ministry doing light work for the rest of his career. Of course, Richard wouldn’t admit that he was wrong and come home, being pig-headed. All the Notts were like that.

“Why, just a bit of dragonweed,” said Aurelius. “A bit more than he’s supposed to have, thanks to his wound nagging him. Not much, you understand. Merlin knows that I don’t want the poor fellow dead.”

Lucius nodded, and let a faint smile grace his lips. He would provide Nott with his dragonweed, and Nott would get his contact on the cells—the nature of whose debt to Nott Lucius didn’t know, and didn’t need to—to make sure that Lucius could chat with James and Lily Potter to his heart’s content. “No one would want that,” he said, and stood, with a small inclination of his head to Aurelius. “Helpful as always, my old friend.”

Aurelius simply nodded. He and Lucius were perhaps not friends, but Lucius genuinely had saved his life, and asked only to be included in his information web as payment for the debt that had incurred. Lucius kept doing small favors for him on occasion, of course, including insuring that his son Marcus had a little extra help on his NEWTS the second year he took them, so that he could actually pass and leave Hogwarts. No need to lose such a valuable friend.

Lucius left with a spring in his step to pick up Harry. Depending on when Nott’s contact could get him in to see the Potters, he might have to be prepared on a moment’s notice. That was no trouble. He had the blank wand, and the owner of the Magical Menagerie had owled him yesterday. A shipment of insects had arrived, bearing his name. Their food was included with them, so they would stay alive until he had need of them. He only needed to go to Diagon Alley and pick them up.

Everything is going well. Of course, why should it not? The world is ordered around the strong, and I am that.

Harry stood uneasily holding his Firebolt and studying the sky. It was clear, late afternoon, in the first throes of sunset. The only good thing about this therapy that Madam Shiverwood had ordered him to do was that it encouraged Narcissa to extend his

bedtime past dusk. Harry had come to think that punishment more and more unfair as the summer advanced and the days grew shorter and shorter.

But now...

Now he had to go flying, and he wasn't sure what would happen when he did. Even granting that all the Malfoys were staying carefully in their Manor, and not looking out the windows to watch him, either, he was afraid of what they might see.

Harry was afraid that he *would* act like a child when he was flying, and that would undo at least some of the respect he'd built up in Lucius and Narcissa's eyes.

Or maybe he was just afraid to do something that felt pleasant, because that would undo other barriers he'd raised, and urge him on a quest for more, more, more.

Harry took a deep breath, slung a leg over his Firebolt, and took off.

He rose faster than he had intended to, and felt fear brush him for a moment. And then it was gone, and he was remembering the speed and strength of the Firebolt from the last time he'd ridden it, and the exaltation that had flooded him when he flew as a child lifted him up and cradled him.

He was laughing. It didn't matter. He circled under the summer sunset, and the gold and the green and the blue seemed to sink into him and pierce him like blades, and that didn't matter, either.

He flew in another circle, then dropped to the ground. The plunge was straight downward. Harry watched the grass grow clearer and more distinct, felt the wind whip tears from his eyes, and laughed and laughed and laughed.

At least he knew none of the Malfoys were watching now, or one of them would have been outside and screaming at him.

At the last moment, Harry flipped backwards, pulling the broom over and around with him, so that he tumbled bristles over head over bristles, and felt the grass kiss his hair like Draco sometimes liked to do, when he thought Harry wouldn't notice. Harry turned around, rolling, so close that he scraped his elbow on the ground, and then blasted back into the sky.

He felt his blood up, hammering through his veins and singing in his ears. For once, for *once*, that wasn't because of battle. He could almost see Madam Shiverwood's point in that moment, that perhaps sometimes he could be a child, and it wouldn't hurt, that it might even help him become a better adult...

He was back to racing across the sky, and the moment was lost, and he was glad. He didn't really want to think right now. He wanted to lift, then dive in a jagged, zigzagging pattern that made an owl setting out from the house dodge him and squawk. Harry chased her for a few moments, then rolled over and dropped towards the ground again, flying upside-down this time.

He gathered his strength and speed before he reached the grass, imagined the ground as a Bludger, and darted sideways so sharply that he felt his neck wrench. But that was all right, that was all right, it was all right as long as he could lift straight up and balance in the air, cocking his head to ease the pain and whirling twice. He didn't need to think about anything up here, and he wasn't afraid of falling or being hurt, because he *knew* how to fly. He could indulge his love for risk-taking here, and no one would yell at him.

Individual movements blended into a great flood of fiery sweetness then, and Harry didn't think like an adult until he landed back on the ground, as the sky was raining blue from above and the sun was setting. He laughed and bent over, wheezing, then rubbed the side of his neck, and realized he'd changed his mind.

As long as the Quidditch team still wanted him, he thought he'd be playing this year after all.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventeen: Like Rational Adults

"I don't know if I'll ever see you again."

Harry blinked and looked up from the letter McGonagall had sent him, then stood and extended his hand to Vince as he walked

across the library. "I know," he said quietly. "I don't think that you'd be safe from your father as long as you stayed in England."

Vince nodded. "It—it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd just done something to embarrass him in private," he said. "But he can't stand being humiliated in public." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Mr. Malfoy is going to open the Floo so that my aunt can come through at one. But you're going to be gone then, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Harry glanced at the letter he'd half-crumpled. "Headmistress McGonagall wants me to come to Hogwarts a little early and meet some people she's hiring for this school year. I already know them, but she thought I should have the time to get used to them." It was bizarre, what she'd written. Acies Lestrangle was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts? Remus returning to be Head of Gryffindor was minor, next to that.

There was something else McGonagall had written, too, but Harry was only going to think about that when he had to.

"I almost wish I could stay," mused Vince, then straightened and shook his head. "Thank you for saving my life," he said formally. "I owe you a Life Debt, and if you ever call on me to fulfill it, then I will."

Harry nodded. He knew he wouldn't be claiming that debt, though. Vince was lucky to still be alive, and Harry wouldn't jeopardize his safety again. Let him enjoy as much peace as might be left in France while he could. Harry hoped to stop the war before it spread that far.

Vince looked as if he wanted to say something more, but in the end he shook his head and left. Harry picked up the letter and scanned the last lines one more time. They hadn't changed. He put it in his robe pocket.

"Harry?"

Draco's head had popped up from one of the chairs in front of the hearth. Harry turned that way with a small grin. Draco had an anxious frown on his face, as if something had changed between them because he wouldn't be accompanying Harry to Hogwarts that day; Narcissa would escort him instead.

"You understand?" Draco said now, just like he had earlier. "I'm sorry, but I really need a certain angle of sunlight for this spell to work the way I want it to, and I want to do it today—"

"Of course I understand," said Harry, and he did. Draco had already modified a spell that he wanted to try, something to do with Ancient Runes and confining his mind in his own body. He'd said he could even adapt it to protect his body during battle, if and when he did manage to train himself to use the possession gift as a weapon. Harry was happy to see him taking the time and the care to develop an interest of his own. Elfrida might be right about Draco's time apart from Harry being his own choice, but since he had made that choice before they knew anything about McGonagall's letter, Harry wasn't about to deprive him of it.

He hesitated for a moment then, but he had already decided that part of overcoming his fear was making the overcoming a casual part of everyday life. He walked over to Draco and kissed his forehead. When he drew back, Draco was staring at him with wide eyes.

Harry didn't give him the chance to question. Narcissa was waiting by one of the other Floo connections to escort him to Hogwarts. He extended his left arm for Argutus, who had been curled on the back of Draco's chair, enjoying the glimpses of the colored runes in the book he read. He coiled drowsily on Harry's shoulder now. Harry hid a grin. The Omen snake would wake up fast enough when they bumped and jostled from fireplace to fireplace.

"Harry—"

Harry nodded at Draco. "Can't talk right now. Got to go." He hurried out of the library before he could let himself think about what he'd just done in either embarrassment or approval. Fawkes appeared above him, briefly, to flit a wing, and then soared away. The phoenix saw no reason to take a Floo journey with either Harry or that snake, Harry suspected.

"Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming."

Harry straightened from the bumpy fireplace crossing into the connecting room to the Headmistress's office, brushed soot off his robe, and listened in amusement to Argutus's outraged complaints while he nodded to McGonagall. "Thank you for inviting me,

Pro—Headmistress.” He hesitated a moment. “Are the people you wanted me to meet with here yet?”

McGonagall, who had been engaged in a staring contest with Narcissa, blinked and returned his gaze a moment later. Harry had taken in the room in the meantime. It was small and dusty, filled with odd objects that had little dust themselves. Harry recognized them as the silver instruments from Dumbledore’s shelves, apparently heaped here because McGonagall had nowhere else to put them. There were no exits except the door she stood in front of and the hearth they’d come in by. Harry tensed minutely, but a voice from the Headmistress’s office gave him something else to think about.

“I’m here at least, Harry, and looking forward to seeing you.”

Harry edged forward and peered shyly—he couldn’t help it—around McGonagall into the office.

Remus Lupin sat in a chair on the other side of the enormous desk that Dumbledore had so often used to make himself look stern, studying what looked like a Pensieve on the desktop. He glanced up swiftly at the small movement, though, and Harry froze at the sight of his face.

He looked so much more relaxed Harry could hardly believe it was him. His hair was covered in gray streaks, as it had been from the time he and Connor were children, but they looked natural now, as though Remus had finally accepted that they could make him look dignified. His eyes were a deep, pure amber that Harry couldn’t entirely attribute to the full moon, since that was still almost two weeks away. And when he smiled and moved forward, holding his hand out, he had a confident stride that Harry had never associated with him. Remus had cringed most of the time, as if he were apologizing for existing. This man didn’t cringe.

Harry took his hand and stared up at him (Remus, like most of the people Harry came into contact with, was still taller than he was, something that caused Harry no small edge of resentment).

“What—“ Harry shook his head, embarrassed that awe was cutting off his voice, but sure that Remus would guess the question without needing to hear it.

Remus laughed, and the sound was one that Harry had never heard, either, though its closest resemblance was to Hawthorn’s, since hers also ended in a little half-bay. “The Sanctuary, Harry. The Seers are very good with not only confronting someone with the truth of his soul, but making him face up to that truth, once he’s accepted it. And, in this case, I decided that I wanted to reflect more of my strengths, instead of hiding them.” He cocked his head and sniffed openly at Harry. “You smell of pain. It would have done you good to go there.”

“I don’t *want* to match what my soul looks like.”

Remus shrugged, and then went back over to his chair to drop into it. Harry followed and sat across from him, barely aware of Narcissa coming to stand behind his seat and McGonagall taking her place behind her desk. “Sometimes we still have the choice, that’s true,” he said. “And I can understand your not wanting to be so separated from the world. But it was fine for me.”

“What was it like?” Harry asked—unwilling, but thinking he had to.

Remus smiled. “Deeply peaceful,” he answered. “I don’t think I can paint a complete picture for someone who hasn’t been there. And I think you’re imagining fights of some kind, Harry, where the Seers try to confront someone with the mirror of his soul and don’t let him turn away. It’s nothing of the kind. You can rest and think of nothing until you’re ready to think of healing.”

He lifted his head, and his smile grew brighter, sharper. “They helped me remember that it’s not my fault I’m a werewolf. I was bitten as a child, and I never asked to be. But I *do* know about the heightened anger that comes with having had the curse since I was so young. I do need to control that better. So I will.” Remus didn’t sound as if he were apologizing, simply stating a fact. “And they have learned how to brew the Wolfsbane Potion, and they have immense forests within the Sanctuary. I ran across them as a werewolf, and learned to glory in my strength and my speed.” He laughed abruptly. “And I picked up a strange and serene manner of speaking that won’t at all do for the rest of the wizarding world.”

“It will do wonderfully for the Gryffindors, Remus,” McGonagall murmured. “Never doubt that.”

Remus nodded to her, and fixed his eyes on Harry, their amber going deep and sad once more. “I am going to ask your apologies for the weakness I once exhibited,” he said. “Now, I can see it for what it was—too much love of my friends, impinging on what I should have done, and what I knew to be right. And though I loved Albus, though he was my mentor and the only person who knew what I was beforehand and welcomed me to Hogwarts anyway, I should have seen the depth of his corruption when he

asked us to leave you defenseless in front of Voldemort.” He had only the smallest twitch at the name, Harry was impressed to see. “So. Will you forgive me?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I didn’t blame you, Remus, not nearly as much as I blamed—well, some of the others.” No need to go about casting blame, when that would only hinder the healing. “And you’ve become the kind of person I think won’t make those mistakes again.” This time, he stood up and put out his arms.

Remus came and embraced him without further prompting. Harry was amused to hear the rasp of wood against cloth—Narcissa’s wand coming forth from her pocket. *Does she really think that I’m in danger with Remus? I would be in as much danger with Hawthorn.*

“Where’s Peter?” he asked, when he could step away, Remus’s hands lingering on his back for an uncomfortably long time, and Remus had resumed his own seat with a quick, lithe movement.

Remus sighed. “He’s gone to the Aurors already. He thought about coming to Hogwarts and saying hello to you, but he was almost sure someone would see and report him, and then he would look like even more of a fugitive than he already does.” He paused, gazing deeply into Harry’s eyes. “You know the whole mess with Sirius will have to come out for him to have a chance at being free again?”

Harry nodded. “I understand.” He’d viewed a few more of the memories in Sirius’s Pensieve, this time ones from his childhood that showed how profoundly he’d been hurt and driven to try and rely on himself before anyone else, and he knew that Sirius—as he had been, really, before Voldemort possessed him—wouldn’t want Peter to keep silent and try to spare *him* pain. Sirius had gone where he couldn’t feel it.

“Good.” Remus smiled again. “I haven’t seen Connor yet, but Minerva is planning to make sure we can meet the first night before term and he can get an idea of me. Right now, it’s unsafe for him to leave his hiding place. Death Eaters have been prowling around it.”

Harry nodded with a faint frown. Sometimes, he wondered whether it wouldn’t be better if everyone knew the truth about his having been the one who deflected Voldemort’s curse. That would at least concentrate the Death Eaters’ attention on Harry himself, and make them leave his brother alone.

He put the idea in the back of his mind to think about later. Perhaps he could get Evan Rosier to spread the word among his former comrades for him. In the meantime, the door was opening.

“Thank you for coming in like a normal person, Acies.” McGonagall’s voice was perfectly correct, but she spoke with the same coolness that her stare to Narcissa conveyed. “Harry, this is Acies Lestrangle, who will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts as Acies Merryweather.” There was a question in her words that Harry thought he put to rest by standing, turning around, and bowing.

“It’s good to see you again, Madam Lestrangle,” he said, while Acies’s cloaked figure leaned against the wall.

“And you, Mr. Potter.” Acies tugged the hood of her cloak down.

Harry couldn’t help tensing—the last time she had done that, in the meeting during Halloween last year when he had seen her for the first time, he had met a pair of eyes that seared him. Now, though, he could see that Acies Lestrangle was a pale-faced woman with long dark hair that had just the slightest hint of a metallic sheen to it when she turned her head, like scales. Her eyes were large and gray.

Briefly, they caught his. Harry jumped as he saw the same wildness he’d glimpsed last year.

“I can control my gaze,” said Acies. “But it is difficult. I shall look no student in the eye for long when I teach my classes. Have you been practicing Defense, Mr. Potter? How good at it are you?”

Harry blinked, but answered, “About as good as could be expected, I suppose. None of the teachers except Remus ever really put us through our paces.” He smiled at Remus, who gave him a comfortable grin back.

“Don’t listen to Harry, Madam Merryweather,” he said. He didn’t even stumble on the name. Harry supposed he’d had a few days to get used to it, though. “He was excellent at all the spells I showed the class, as he is at all defensive magic. And, of course, he

has more experience at identifying Light and Dark, and balancing between them, than any ten wizards.”

“Is that so?” Acies’s voice was low and thoughtful. “Then perhaps I will have to drill you a bit harder than the others, Mr. Potter.”

“I would welcome the chance to learn more,” said Harry, “now that the war is begun.”

“Everyone knows the war has begun.” Acies waved one hand as if to show that she thought little of such general knowledge, even as she tugged the hood of her cloak back over her face. “It is in the words of the Muggles, though they do not recognize the signs, and the songs of the sirens that throb through the water, and the bang of the mountain trolls’ clubs upon the ground. And, of course, the dragons are singing with it.”

“Have you been among the dragons, then?” Harry wondered if he dared ask for news of them. He had known no dragons but the three he freed last year, but he hoped they were well. No telling if they were the dragons that Acies had seen, though.

“Oh, yes,” said Acies. “Wandering, and soaking in their music, and breathing it back to them. War and *vates*, war and *vates*, those are the substances of their talk. They see far and clearly, even as I do. They know that storms are coming.” Harry, remembering what the Light had shown him about the storm coming on Midwinter night, started. “And they plan to be here to offer their help when the storms come. Their bodies are made of music, and they will need much music. But that will be no trouble for the wild Dark, and when Midsummer comes, the air itself will cry out the symphony.”

Not at all sure what that meant, but comforted, Harry nodded. “It’s going to be very interesting having you for a teacher, Madam Le—Merryweather,” he said, deciding that he’d better get used to the name now.

“Is it?” Acies moved her head restlessly. “I would not know. I am not teaching myself, of course.”

Harry could hear Narcissa making a low, puzzled noise behind him. He didn’t know why. She was one of those who had first introduced him to Acies, after all, and she must have known her longer. He smiled, unable to help himself, and wondered what his yearmates would think of Acies. Perhaps she would be a perfectly ordinary teacher, but somehow, when she was talking about dragons and music with this intensity, he doubted it.

Then someone knocked on the door of the office.

And Harry remembered the last lines of McGonagall’s letter, the other person she had said she wanted him here early to meet. He found his magic surging about him like grass whipped by the wind, and Acies cocked her head. Remus whispered, “Harry?” in a low, concerned voice, and Narcissa’s hand gripped his shoulder.

“Since Harry is returning to Hogwarts,” said McGonagall calmly, “I asked him to come here early to meet those professors he might be uncomfortable with. And that includes the one he is *most* uncomfortable with. I will have my teachers and Mr. Potter, since he is not a child, behave like rational adults.” She stood and looked at Harry. “Are you ready, Mr. Potter?”

Her formal tone, and the name she called him, gave him time to steady himself. Harry glanced at Remus, Narcissa, and Acies. “I am, Headmistress. May I ask that I talk to Professor Snape alone?”

“No,” said McGonagall, making Harry blink. “You will be around many other people at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter, including the students in your Potions class. I think it best for you to relearn how to interact in front of an audience immediately. I do not ask for warmth from you,” she added, her voice dropping a notch. “Only rationality.”

Harry thought he could do that. He’d lain awake thinking about Snape last night, and even talking to Argutus, and that had worn a little of his rage out. It helped that Argutus was crawling around on his shoulder to face the door now, flicking out his tongue and saying, “*Am I going to see the one you were angry about? I wonder what he is like. I wonder what would happen if I squeezed around his wrist. But I shall only try to do that if he threatens you. It is useless to threaten without any reason.*” He sounded as if he were trying that one out as a philosophical pronouncement.

“All right,” Harry said quietly.

“Come in, Severus,” McGonagall called, and then the door opened, and Snape was there. Though he couldn’t have known how they would be arranged in the room, his eyes went to Harry immediately and stayed there.

Harry stared back. Snape looked as he looked most of the time: pressed to the edges of his patience in having to continually deal

with idiots. He bore a faint redness to his hands that Harry thought meant he must have scrubbed off the latest of a batch of Potions ingredients before he came to the Headmistress's office. Argutus flicked his tongue out and remarked, "*He smells like dead things.*"

"He would not forgive you for saying so," Harry said, with his head turned towards the Omen snake, and then faced Snape again. He tried to keep his expression blank, his gaze and voice both as steady as always. "Hello, sir," he said.

"Hello, Harry." That was unfair, Harry thought, because Snape was not obeying the law McGonagall had laid down and acting entirely like a rational adult. He spoke with less than the warmth he would have displayed most of the time, but his voice was not cold, either. And he looked as if he were studying Harry, giving silent approval to the way he looked—as if he were worried about his health or his mental state or both, and were concerned about him when they'd been apart for the summer.

Harry ground his teeth. What *right* did Snape have to look at him that way? Even if Madam Shiverwood had a point and he had done the wrong thing for the moral motives, that didn't mean that he had to *stare* that way, as if he were a parent and Harry were his child. He was a guardian. That was all.

Except that if he did make a deliberate sacrifice of my love and respect, I doubt he thinks about it that distantly.

That just made him want to scream, so Harry shoved the thought away and locked it in a dark closet. He wondered what else he should say. The other people in the room all looked as if they thought the conversational burden should be on him, and Snape was apparently content to remain silent, his eyes devouring all sorts of little things about Harry that Harry had hoped he wouldn't be able to see.

Harry picked what he thought was a safe topic, after a moment of thinking. "How are you getting on with your potions brewing, sir?" he asked, and only heard his words after they were out and he saw McGonagall's quick disapproving look—sharp enough to cut glass. He winced and made some effort to relax his jaw.

"Well enough," said Snape equitably. "I shall soon have the hospital wing restocked. One benefit of being at Hogwarts most of the summer, unable to leave because Death Eaters are hunting for me."

And then he dropped the conversation again, and Harry had to choose something else. The silence rolled on like boulders. Finally, he said, "Are you eager for the term to begin, sir?"

"Of course," said Snape, and now his eyes were sharper, and he was speaking as he might have if they were alone, which was *also* unfair, because he had taken care not to act like such a—such a *parent* when he and Harry were in front of an audience in the past. "Along with the idiots that I must teach, there are the few students who have both the interest in Potions and the skills to make teaching them worthwhile. And my ward returns to Hogwarts with them. I have missed him."

Harry closed his eyes. He would *have* to calm down and not snap. McGonagall would not understand what was wrong if he snapped now. No one would, except perhaps Argutus and Remus, who could smell his emotions. They probably all thought this was kind, as close to caring as Snape ever got.

And it was. But it was not kind to do as he was now, speaking in a way that Harry wasn't ready to respond to, and couldn't answer honestly without sounding like a child.

A few more impatient, huffed breaths, and Harry was ready to step in a new direction. "How many students do you anticipate having in your NEWT class this year, Professor?" he asked. A safe topic. A neutral topic. A topic that Snape could not possibly twist back around to him, because Harry had not even taken his OWLS yet.

"Seven or eight," said Snape. "Perhaps even a smaller number next year. But I am assured of at least three next year: Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, and yourself."

Harry swallowed. Then he said, "Professor McGonagall, I trust that I've demonstrated my self-control to your satisfaction?" He turned his back on Snape. "I'd like to go home now, please, Narcissa." She'd told him to call her that, and he didn't often do it even now, but he just couldn't take any more of this. At least during Potions class, he and Snape wouldn't have time for this kind of private, killing conversation.

"Of course, Harry," said Narcissa, and escorted him back in the direction of the side room and the fireplace.

Harry tilted his head in response to Remus's soft farewell, but didn't show any reaction when Snape spoke his name—just once, with a deep mingling of several emotions in that single word. Madam Shiverwood *might* be right, but Snape could not simply demand forgiveness and have that forgiveness come to him. How *could* he? And why would he want to flay Harry alive with his words, if he were not taking pleasure in this?

I think she's overestimated Severus Snape. But Merlin knows I did that.

Snape stood still and watched Harry go with regret pressing against his heart like a knife-blade.

He knew, now, that he should have analyzed the ice of Harry's responses and met it with ice of his own. Then perhaps they could have eased past those awkward initial moments and forged the cool but working relationship the Headmistress wanted them to have. He could show how much he'd missed Harry, which was a perfectly sincere emotion, later in the school year.

Instead, he'd been tempted by the ice into thinking that Harry didn't *realize* his guardian missed him, and he'd lowered his defenses.

And now he hurt, and Harry probably thought him insincere.

Snape sighed. There was no easy path to take with a child like Harry, and no getting that easily out of what he had done. He knew that, intellectually, and yet he kept hoping for every confrontation to turn out better than it had.

Sometimes I am a fool.

But he was not so great a fool as to give up and retreat, or go cold again, the way he might have done last year. He would simply remain on the horizon, and not let Harry forget either what he had done or his motives for doing so. Harry looked healthy, but there was that depth in the back of his eyes that Snape knew spoke of loneliness, of too great a control. He obviously felt unwilling to simply let go of his emotions with the Malfoys the way he sometimes had with Snape.

He needs a guardian. He needs a parent. I will be there when he remembers or realizes that.

"It's not your fault, Severus." Lupin had actually stood and pressed his hand. "Harry's hurting right now, and the only thing he knows how to do is curl up and hide his pain. He'll come around eventually."

Snape wanted to snap at the bloody werewolf—just because Lupin had changed did not mean Snape had forgotten or forgiven what he had done the last time he was at Hogwarts—but he caught the Headmistress's frown and remembered what she had said about all the Hogwarts professors acting like rational adults. "Thank you, Lupin," he managed to say, between only slightly gritted teeth.

Draco studied the angle of sunlight coming through the window of the room he'd chosen for practice, and nodded once, wiping his hands off on his trousers as he stepped into the circle of runes he'd drawn on the floor. The runes were standard protection designs, but they weren't usually combined with ones for confinement; most protection circles kept people safe and baleful influences out, without caging those they defended like prisoners. Draco didn't know exactly what would happen when a circle was made to keep the baleful influence in with him.

He *thought* it would work. It was half a ring of protection combined with half a ring of confinement, though not as simply as having them meet in the middle; instead, Draco had drawn one kind of rune, then another, then the first kind again, until they were thoroughly mixed. It was the first idea he'd had, and he thought it was a good one.

He was sure it would work.

Well.

Pretty sure.

It was supposed to come alive when the sunlight struck the outer side of the ring of runes, which was an idea Draco had taken

from Harry's description of the truce-dance. That was linked to sunlight and the passage of time, and it seemed to be pretty damn powerful magic. He wanted his rune circle to be the same way.

He watched. The sunlight crept across the floor, and crept, and crept, and then it struck the outermost rune of protection, falling at the same time on one of the runes of confinement.

The designs blazed, turning golden and white, so brilliant that Draco couldn't look at them. He sat down in the middle of the ring and closed his eyes, then tried to *jump* with his mind the way he'd practiced with Harry, reaching for his father—the only other person in the house right now, since Harry and his mother hadn't come back from Hogwarts yet, and Vince had already left with his aunt.

He bounced back, so hard that he went sprawling on the floor. Draco blinked and gasped, then grinned.

I did it. On my first try, I invented a spell! Well, a rune circle, not a spell, but still! I did it.

He sat up, flushed with success, and reached out to leave the circle. Since the runes had taken him so long to draw, he would leave them here, he thought, and use them again, testing and strengthening them.

The white-gold light bounced his arm back.

Frowning, Draco lunged forward with the full weight of his body behind his arm. This time, he nearly skidded to the other side of the circle. The confinement and protection runes beneath the place he'd tried to leave the ring were both lit, he saw, and only subsided into sparks as he remained still.

What he had done came to him quickly, of course. The confinement runes were working to keep his possession still, and didn't want his mind to leave the circle. The protection runes would hold his body safe in cases where someone outside the circle tried *Imperius* or a similar spell to get him to leave it, and they were identifying his possession gift as that kind of influence.

He couldn't just reach down and smudge the runes, either, since they spat sparks at him when he came near. He would have to wait until the sunlight moved across the circle, or perhaps until Harry came back and could use his magic to dispel the influence of the runes.

Draco sighed. Then he grinned, because he couldn't help grinning.

It almost worked perfectly. I still did it. I still made a spell circle. And I did it without Harry's help. Harry doesn't even know Ancient Runes.

He savored the small glow of pride that came with that, and sat down, patiently, to wait the sunlight or the passage of time out.

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

Chapter Eighteen: Hogwarts Again

Harry could feel his face turning red. He stepped back behind the corner of the hallway and blinked at nothingness.

Well. Of all the ways he had expected to come upon his brother, that hadn't been one of them.

He and Draco had arranged to come through one of the Malfoy fireplaces into the Headmistress's office. Harry had thought, probably with too much innocence, that they would be riding the Hogwarts Express to school. But Draco had given him a patient look, and Narcissa had explained that going to London just to ride the train was too dangerous for Harry, that of course it was much better to have him go into the school this way, where he could be protected. Lucius had said nothing at all. The expression, or rather non-expression, on his face proclaimed too clearly that Harry should have known better.

Harry had the feeling that he wouldn't be bored with the Malfoys, whatever else he might feel while he was with them. They simply changed too often to keep him other than occupied.

McGonagall had told him, smiling when he asked, that yes, Connor was already here. He'd been taken shopping in Diagon Alley yesterday under a glamour, and then come through a fireplace from his hiding spot, escorted by a veritable army of Weasleys. He'd met Remus already, and seemed happy enough about it. No, she didn't know where he was now, only that he'd taken his

things up to Gryffindor Tower. Harry should seek him there, but hurry, because they really didn't have that much time before the Sorting Feast began.

Harry had asked Draco, with a smile that he knew usually made Draco do things for him, to take his things down to the dungeons. Draco had agreed before he realized what he was doing. Then he glared, but Harry was gone, hurrying towards the Tower. He didn't know the password, but he didn't have to. He'd wait outside the Fat Lady's portrait for Connor to come out if he had to, and knowing what she was like, he might even be able to charm her into letting him in.

Instead, he'd found Connor already outside the Tower, waiting in the corridor.

Well. Not waiting so much as snogging Parvati Patil.

Harry waited until he thought the wet sounds had stopped, and then casually put his head around the corner again. Connor was standing with his hands on Parvati's shoulders and his forehead resting against hers; at least Parvati was shorter than both of them, to Harry's intense delight. He whispered something to her. Parvati said something back, which, miraculously, did not seem to end in a giggle.

Harry decided that he could show himself now. He coughed and stepped into plain sight.

Connor jumped, and then he smiled, even as he flushed bright red. Parvati only laughed at the sight of Connor's face, at least until she turned around and saw who it was. Harry noticed that her eyes narrowed immediately and she turned on her heel, walking towards the portrait with a sharp shake of her head.

His brother hurried towards him, and Harry decided that questions could wait. Connor hugged him, and Harry hugged him back, hard. They hadn't parted under the best of circumstances last time. Letters were no substitute for the apologies that Harry wanted to make.

"Connor," he murmured. "I know I already wrote this, but I was wrong to say the things that I did to you at the Weasleys'." He pulled back, studying Connor's hazel eyes and wondering if he was forgiven.

Connor just rolled his eyes indulgently. "Of *course* you were wrong, Harry. You were so ridiculous that it was easy to forgive you. At least, well, it was once I got over being angry at you for doing something *else* stupid. Only you would go home and try to rebuild yourself entirely."

Harry sighed, and some part of him relaxed for the first time since the battle with Voldemort. He felt able to nod after Parvati now. "What is she doing here already?" he asked. "I thought she was going to ride the Hogwarts Express?"

Connor laughed. "She was, but she got her parents to fly her down on their brooms instead. She knew that I was going to be here early, and she wanted to see me." He lowered his head, and the flush grew fiercer. "She wasn't, ah, very happy that I couldn't see her all summer."

"I think I missed something," said Harry. He paused as Argutus wriggled out on his shoulder, but Connor just nodded at the Omen snake; thanks to the letters Harry had written him, he needed no introduction. Harry cocked his head at his brother. "I had no idea that you, well, fancied her that much. I thought you went with her to the Yule Ball and snogged her a few other times, and that was all."

"Um."

Harry wasn't about to let this go. It was the first time in months he'd had some sort of advantage over his brother, moral or otherwise, and he pressed down. "Perhaps there was some more snogging that I missed, then. Or even more than that. Perhaps there was a romantic proposal of marriage?"

"Shut *up*," Connor informed him. "No, there wasn't. I fancy her, sure, Harry, but I'm not going that far yet."

Harry just nodded, and tried to think up another good dig. Before he could, Connor added, "Besides which, I don't think that you have much room to talk. You might not want to write about it, but I knew that Malfoy fancied you last year before you did, and I didn't think he'd let it go. How has *that* been going, Harry?"

"I think the Feast is starting," said Harry, and walked away while he still had some dignity intact.

He hadn't realized it would be so hard.

Oh, yes, there were the newspaper articles, and there had been that embarrassing scene with so many people coming up to him in Diagon Alley. But since the start of summer—no, before that, since he had come back from the graveyard—Harry had only been around people who had done as much as they could to avoid staring at him, even when they pushed him to face harsh truths. He had forgotten that most of the students and professors in the Great Hall would have been devouring the news of the child abuse charges for two months now, that, to some of them, he was the main reason that Headmaster Dumbledore was now in prison.

He had even managed to forget that most of them still thought he had a left hand.

Heads turned to orient on him as he hurried in through the doors of the Great Hall and over to the Slytherin table, only a short distance behind the returning students from his House. Harry met pair after pair of eyes, and saw intense wonder, or intense pity, or, sometimes, disgust—usually on the faces of children from Light pureblood wizarding families. They had been Dumbledore's allies, he knew, and they had grown up revering him. Child abuse charges were horrific things, but they were also more distant to children than to parents. Some of them would understand only that the Headmaster, a hero of their youth, was gone.

Harry shook his head as he slid into his seat next to Draco. *It's like Parvati's reaction. I suppose that she's upset and thinks I kept her from seeing Connor, but really, why did she have to glare and stamp off? And why are so many people looking at me that way? Surely they have lives. Things to do that don't involve me.*

The Sorting began, amid extremes of emotion greater than usual. Each House clapped frantically when a new student joined it—except Slytherin, who, Harry thought as he imitated them, seemed to have decided on decorum by silent unanimous vote even before he arrived—as if they wanted to emphasize that they still existed in the midst of war. In between the time when one House name and another was called, though, people went on staring at and buzzing about Harry.

Harry tried to ignore the sensation of ants crawling on his skin, and slapped his hand politely on the table for each new Slytherin—three new girls and two new boys, so far. He wished they were allowed to eat before the Sorting ended. He would have had something to occupy him, and let him pretend as if those eyes didn't exist.

Especially the eyes from one particular direction. He knew McGonagall and Remus were only watching him with concern, but that made no difference to his hatred of attention.

And if Snape would look at someone else this century, Harry would be glad to be civil to him for the rest of the year.

The last first-year, Muggleborn Joshua Zinosi, went to Hufflepuff, and the applause died. Gratefully, Harry watched as Hagrid came forward and took the stool and the Sorting Hat away, and eyes turned to McGonagall as she rose to her feet.

This was her first speech as Headmistress, Harry realized with a start. Of course people would be looking to her, wondering what she would say. He wondered if she was as nervous as he would be in that situation.

Probably not, he had to think. Why the hell would she be nervous? She's been preparing for this all summer. She plans her lessons down to the minute. I'd think she'd do rather well with a speech.

But maybe not, Harry had to concede, as he caught just the faintest signs of strain on McGonagall's face. After all, she did have to follow a revered Headmaster, and she would be struggling to pull both Hogwarts and Gryffindor House out of the shame of ignominy. Harry winced at the thought of how hard it must have been for her to come to terms with knowing that a leader and friend and someone who shared her House had done all this. He wondered if there was some way he could help her.

"Students," said McGonagall then, her voice stern and loud. Harry didn't think she was using a *Sonus* charm, but she calmed all traces of conversation in the Great Hall anyway. What Dumbledore did with reputation and majesty and perhaps just the slightest hint of compulsion, the Headmistress did with sheer unflinching reluctance to back down. Harry saw her eyes get fiercer and fiercer as they studied each House table. "Welcome back to another year at Hogwarts. As most of you know, I am now Headmistress of the school, following the disgrace and imprisonment of Albus Dumbledore."

There was some mumbling at that. Of course there would be. Harry caught a glimpse of movement at the Hufflepuff table, and glanced over to see Hannah Abbott and a few of the other Muggleborn students debating intensely with the pureblood Ernie

Macmillan. Zacharias Smith was listening to them, looking bored. As if feeling Harry's eyes, he looked up and nodded once. Harry nodded back. However pompous his means of expressing it, Zacharias's offer of alliance was not one to be turned down. Harry had written back taking him up on it, and they'd exchanged a few other stiff letters over the summer.

"I promise," said McGonagall, "that Hogwarts will never again become a place where anyone tolerates child abuse, or the consequences of it."

A few people gasped. Harry himself started back on the bench, and felt Draco put a comforting hand on his shoulder and squeeze. Millicent, who sat on his other side, whispered, "Didn't know she was going to do that, either, Harry, but it'll be all right. We won't let you down."

Harry nodded his thanks, and kept his gaze fixed on McGonagall.

"I will pull Gryffindor House out of its shame," said McGonagall. "I will pull the school and all the Houses out of the muck and mire they have been splashing themselves in, and insure that we are ready to meet this war. From now on, rather than having them with only one other House, your classes will be mixed, including students from all four, though there will be still be two groups for each year." She completely ignored the rising tide of outright suspicion and panic at that. "As well, since I am now Headmistress, I will be fulfilling my duties as Transfiguration teacher with the help of several of my NEWT students. And Remus Lupin, a Gryffindor himself, has returned to take my place as Head of Gryffindor House, so that I do not neglect any of my responsibilities."

Remus rose to his feet with a small smile and nod to most of the students. Harry saw gaping mouths and stares from most of them in return. He winced, and wondered how many letters the Ministry or the newspapers or their parents would receive in the next week.

Well, it's as it must be. The Headmistress did say that she was ready to face this, or she would never have hired Remus to come here in the first place. And since she's not providing him with money, they can't legally complain.

"We have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor as well," McGonagall was saying, as Remus sat back down. "Her name is Acies Merryweather, and she should be—"

A loud song burst from the door of the Great Hall at that moment. Harry turned his eyes in that direction, and found himself staring. Acies was standing there, but she looked as different as possible from the cloaked figure he had briefly met in McGonagall's office, whose hair and eyes, if one looked closely enough, proclaimed her resemblance to Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle.

She wore no cloak at all, and flowing light green robes that were only an inch or two from a gown. Her hair was still black, but her eyes large and a blue so clear that Harry could see them from here, the color of lightning. She had a white bird of some kind on her hand. Harry thought it looked like a dove, but no dove sang that loudly, or that sweetly.

Acies lifted her hand, and let the dove soar towards the ceiling. Then she walked up the middle of the Great Hall towards the head table, as if she were unconscious of all the stares on her. Harry wondered how she could do *that*, and if she would manage to teach him to do it.

"Thank you, Headmistress," she said, when she reached the head table and could sink into a graceful curtsy, with her robes puddling around her. "That is quite a welcome, and more than I should think I would have, coming back to Hogwarts." Her voice had the same loud sweetness as the dove's cry. Without looking anyone in the eye for long, without saying it, Harry thought, she was proclaiming that she was a Light witch with every move she made.

He shook his head in amusement. If anything, parents would be writing to express their approval of McGonagall making sure she had hired a pureblood woman from a good family right after they'd had a traitor, a fool, a werewolf, and two Death Eaters in the position.

"You are quite welcome, Professor Merryweather." McGonagall herself appeared caught between pleasure in the deceit and disgust that it was necessary. "Please sit down, and then the Feast can begin."

There was a loud cheer from several of the students at that. Acies rose and took her seat. Harry rolled his eyes when he noticed that some of the students continued staring at her and dug into the food that appeared in front of him. Really, they would get to see her most of the weeks between now and June. What was the point of looking at her when there was something to eat?

“Guess what, Potter.” Millicent elbowed him in the ribs, making him grunt.

“What?” Harry took a moment to recover his breath. Millicent, he was annoyed to see, was *still* taller than he was, and having her elbow him was no small matter.

“I’ve been made Prefect.” Millicent showed off the badge clinging to her robe with undeniable smugness.

“So have I,” said Blaise Zabini, leaning around her to show off his own. “And I notice that among the three boys left in our year, Professor Snape chose neither his ward nor his ward’s boyfriend.” He clucked his tongue. “I suppose that just proves that Professor Snape can recognize talent when he sees it.”

“Careful, Blaise,” said Harry, turning back to his plate. “You’re going to stink like Snape’s shit if you go on kissing his arse like that.”

Millicent let out a shocked laugh, half-gasp and half-snicker. Blaise turned the color of tomatoes, but couldn’t seem to get his breath back for a moment, and then couldn’t think of a reply when he did. Harry raised his eyebrows in response to the older students smirking at him, and went on eating.

Draco’s hand on his shoulder made him look to the side. Draco leaned close enough that someone else would probably think that he was kissing Harry. Harry tensed, then let himself remember it was all right if other people thought that.

“You would never make a crack like that about Snape ordinarily,” Draco whispered. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine where he’s concerned,” said Harry. “The Headmistress said that I had to be, so I am. I’ve put my emotions in the Occlumency pools. Doesn’t mean I can’t crack a joke when Blaise’s being obnoxious, does it?”

Draco winced. “Harry,” he said. “My empathy is declining, but I felt as if I were standing in the middle of a snowstorm when you said that. If that’s putting your anger into the Occlumency pools, I’d hate to see what it was like before you did that.”

Shit, he’s right. Harry concentrated as hard as he could, stamping down on his emotions and drowning them in quicksilver. It didn’t quite work. There was still the anger, and the confusion over the fact that Snape wasn’t glaring at him. If he would just show anger and hurt in return, this would be so much easier.

And there was the growing, nagging consciousness that he *wanted* to forgive Snape, or at least have a private shouting session with his guardian, in which he made Snape understand, from beginning to end, exactly why Harry was so furious and why nothing like that would ever, ever happen again.

But that was impossible. Harry was aware of what he would admit, if he went through that shouting session and that forgiveness. He would be saying, at some level, that what Snape had done was the right thing to do, and that he accepted Snape’s authority over him as a guardian.

And, well, it *hadn’t* been right, and he *didn’t* accept that Snape had any authority over him. Not now. Not ever again. He would keep the promises he made to adults, he would listen to their suggestions when they were good ones, and he would ask them for help.

But, he had decided after long consideration in the last days of the summer, he would not take any adult as a parent. It only resulted in bad things happening. He had no idea how to be a son. They either tried to control him when they thought of themselves as parents, or thought they had to look out for him by hurting other people. And until he figured out how to manage a new relationship with Snape that would tell the man in no uncertain terms that Harry wouldn’t accept his authority as guardian back, then he would have to maintain the coldly polite, calm, rational manner that the Headmistress had asked as his least effort.

Like that, he got through dinner, and was just standing up to leave when Zacharias Smith came up to the Slytherin table and nodded at him. Harry had been vaguely aware that he’d gone to the Gryffindor table and talked with Hermione, who now stood beside Zacharias. She looked half-exasperated, half-fond. Harry imagined that he often wore the same expression when he was with Draco, such as when he and Narcissa arrived back from Hogwarts the other day to find Draco trapped and sheepish in his rune circle.

“Harry,” said Zacharias.

“Zacharias,” said Harry back, feeling a bit stupid, and hating that eyes were focused on him once more. *Look, stare when I get on a broom and fly at dragons if you like, but this is just two friends talking. Odd as it might seem to you, I am not extraordinary all the fucking time. Go away. Stop looking at me.*

“I wanted to ask you if you would train us in serious dueling this year,” said Zacharias. “The history has been useful, particularly for Hermione here—“

“Who managed to stump you with a list of pureblood rituals that you didn’t know?” Hermione said, not quite low enough to escape Harry’s notice. Several of the Slytherins chuckled. Zacharias flushed, but continued on after just a small pause.

“And the other small spells served their purpose, too. But I’m talking about major dueling.” He leaned forward and held Harry’s eyes. “Offensive spells. The kind that Voldemort—“

This time, Hermione did look at him in admiration, and the attention of the Slytherins had become as intense as focused sunlight. Harry lifted his head and continued listening.

“—and his Death Eaters use,” Zacharias went on. He seemed to swell and gain under the attention, rather than look ridiculous from or despise it. “This is war, after all. I want to live through it.”

Harry felt some of the attention turn and reorient on him in a new way. Though he had never spoken openly with anyone but his yearmates about it, Harry knew that some of the people he shared a House with had Death Eater ties. The same thing would be true in other Houses, but a deeper secret. Crabbe and Goyle were gone, and their absences were as clear as an open wound. Others would follow, and the majority would come from Slytherin. Some of them were almost challenging him to make an open declaration of his allegiance now.

The only puzzle to Harry was why they might think that he *feared* to declare his allegiance.

“So do I,” he said quietly. “And I would welcome people I could trust fighting at my back, though I hope the War ends and the bastard dies before it comes to that. Of course, Zacharias. Now that I know these lessons are something people want, I’ll both continue and step them up.”

Zacharias inclined his head. The motion was grave, and in some ways extremely condescending, but Harry could see the grandeur in it, the kind of emotion that would have made Light pureblood wizards look imposing when they performed it.

“Good, Harry,” he said. “Or should I say Mr. Potter, my ally?” He lifted his eyebrows and looked around the Great Hall, raising his voice as he said that part, and Harry had no doubt that the announcement of their alliance was one of the reasons he had asked Harry about their little dueling club in public.

That brought more focused attention than ever, but Harry just shook his head and turned for the dungeons. There was at least one more confrontation waiting for him there, one person who had been conspicuously absent from dinner.

Someone bumped into him as he was leaving the Hall. Harry felt Draco’s shoulder catch him, and he nodded his thanks before he turned and confronted the person who had jostled him.

“Watch where you’re going, Potter,” Montague said, curling his lip at Harry. His face was hard, and he certainly seemed to be paying more attention to Harry than he ever had. “We wouldn’t want you to trip and break your little neck.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Montague’s antagonism had at least a few probable causes. Of course, he could be getting ready to become a Death Eater himself, but he had also shown some interest, last year, in a person Harry had deeply hurt.

He chose the obvious route first. “Want to show me your left arm, Montague?” he asked, pitching his voice low enough not to carry.

Montague jerked as if stung, and then leaned nearer, every sense obviously on high alert. “You just keep telling yourself that you’ll *survive* this war, Potter,” he breathed, and hurried off.

Harry calmly watched him go. Nothing had been proven, after all, and it would be stupid of Voldemort to mark students still in Hogwarts as Death Eaters, especially Quidditch players, who would spend time changing into and out of their clothing in front of

other people. He put Montague into the *Unknown, possibly a threat* category in his mind, and walked in the direction of the dungeons.

Draco walked at his side. He kept shaking his head. Harry finally glanced at him. “What?”

“I don’t know how you can just shrug that off,” Draco muttered. “He practically threatened you, and you threatened him back.”

Only then did Harry realize that, for all his joking tone, Draco’s lips were pale, and his teeth caused a faint but audible grinding when he pushed them together. Harry reached out to gently grip his hand. That would get more stares. He didn’t care. Reassuring Draco was more important.

“Draco,” he said quietly. “I’ve trained all my life to survive situations exactly like this. Evaluating people who might be either threats or allies is as easy as breathing, and so is retorting when they issue vague threats against my life.” He sighed when Draco just looked at him in silent misery. “This is going to be harder for you than it is for me, isn’t it?” he added, letting his hand brush Draco’s cheek.

Draco turned his head into the touch, and then uttered a little desperate mutter. Harry could make it out when he strained his ears. “I hate seeing you in danger.”

“I know,” said Harry, and waited until Draco stepped in front of him to begin walking to the dungeons again. Then he put a hand on the small of his back, ignoring Draco’s half-startled, half-indignant look, and ushered him along. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

Draco obviously did not know which expression he ought to wear in response to that. Harry hummed in pleasure to himself, and thought he was doing quite well at fulfilling Madam Shiverwood’s prescriptions, even though he hadn’t written down that he liked reassuring Draco on the list she’d forced him to make.

“Potter.”

Harry sighed as he put down the book he’d just been pretending to read. Draco had gone upstairs already, to give him some privacy when this confrontation came. Of course he didn’t deserve any more familiarity than she was going to give him with the cold pronunciation of his surname, but he’d been hoping for it anyway. “Parkinson,” he said, meeting her on equal ground.

Pansy folded her arms and stared at him. She was wearing robes that enveloped her more completely than the usual school ones, leaving only her face and hands visible. Eventually, Harry knew, she would go about so that her face was entirely hidden, and only show it to her spouse and children. She wouldn’t speak, either, save as such quick motions of her hands might speak, except on Halloween and Walpurgis Night.

She’d gone further down the road towards becoming a necromancer than Harry had thought she would, if she was wearing these robes now. Looking at her set, pale face, Harry thought she might just make it.

“I am choosing you to be one of my Speakers,” said Pansy abruptly. “That means that you’ll be one of the people who talks to those outside Slytherin House for me, the person who gives excuses to professors if I’m sick or studying, one of those I can choose to pass along messages once I stop speaking to most people and I absolutely need them to know something.”

Harry caught his breath. He’d read about Speakers, but he would never have thought that Pansy would choose him to be one, not when he’d killed her father in the first place.

“I don’t deserve this honor,” he said quietly.

“No, you don’t.” Pansy folded her arms more tightly. “But each young necromancer chooses three Speakers, Potter—one whom she absolutely trusts, one whom she can vaguely trust, and one whom she hates. That allows her three degrees of distance from the world, to represent the distance she’ll eventually have from almost everybody. Millicent and Montague are the others.”

So, Montague might have been upset with me for hurting Pansy after all. Harry added that to his mental impression of the other boy, and nodded.

“All right then,” he said. He had to do all he could to make things up to her and to support her in this path that was her own free choice, and Merlin knew, this was little enough.

“Because you’re a Speaker, I can talk to you honestly,” said Pansy, without seeming to notice his acceptance. “I want you to know that I hate you, Potter. The more I study, the more I see what D—Dragonsbane gave up, and the more I see what he attained. You took that all away in a single stroke. And yes, my mother’s talked to me and told me not to hate you, that I don’t understand. I don’t care. I don’t care if she’s allies with you. She can be allies with you all she wants. But you’ll never be anything to me now but the person who took my father away. Do you understand?”

Harry winced, but nodded. He was glad that Pansy could feel honest anger towards him, that her vacillating emotions had hardened over the summer into this rage and determination. It was better, healthier for her, than the sort of regret that he had felt when Sirius died, as if he hadn’t said enough to make clear his emotions while his godfather was alive. If he couldn’t do anything else for her, couldn’t open freedom to her in any other way, then Harry would be her Speaker and help her along the path that would let her become what she wished to be.

“I want to hear you say it,” said Pansy.

“I understand.”

Pansy tossed her hair inside her cowl, and then turned away from him. Harry sighed and sat back down on the couch. He’d lost his appetite for even the pretense of reading.

He didn’t know how long he’d sat there before an owl fluttered through the door of the common room, just opening at that moment to let some of the students out, and up to him. Harry eyed her in confusion as he accepted the letter. He didn’t know the owl, though of course that didn’t mean anything.

The letter was brief, but the handwriting told him at once who it was from.

My dear, dear Potter:

I hope that you do not find yourself too devastated with not hearing from me. Until now, however, I have had no news of great importance to send you, and one should always refrain from wearying owls when one has nothing to say. Then they bite one, and one must strike them dead with an Avada Kedavra, and that is a waste of a perfectly good owl.

You should know that my late unlamented colleague Mulciber did manage to cause some minor trouble last year, in between casting increasingly ineffective Imperius Curses at you. He gained access to the parchment book that contains the names of magical children destined for Hogwarts, by the simple expedient of asking to see it (I believe he had some tale of lessening the prejudice of purebloods against Muggleborns, but not wanting to ask the students outright if they were likely to hold those prejudices). He copied down some of the names of those not yet at the school, and passed them on to my Lord.

Some of my—call them friends—now insinuate that my Lord is attacking Muggleborn children younger than eleven, and draining them of their magic in order to strengthen himself. He used to not do such a thing, because eating one person’s magic weakened him for days afterward. Since his return from the cauldron, however, he has been able to do this with much greater ease, which may be attributed to the bit of flesh and blood that he took from you. Good show, Potter, really, increasing that particular ability of his.

Why did I not tell you this before now? Because I did not feel like it. Now I do. Also, I have been a little too good to you, I think, and now deserve to watch you suffer and squirm.

Your dear, dear self-interested friend, who now needs to Apparate as his older friends are closing in,

Evan Rosier.

Harry crumpled the letter in his fist, and closed his eyes. He forced himself to do nothing but breathe for moments, and shove away as much of the guilt as he could. He had seen nothing in his visions that had let him guess Voldemort was doing this.

You’ve not exactly gone seeking the visions either, though. You wanted a quiet night’s sleep more than you wanted the information.

Harry bowed his head. In fact, his major emotion, despite what he had done to make this possible for Voldemort, was not guilt, but a tight, tearless rage.

He had some interesting ideas now that he hadn't had at the beginning of the summer. They coalesced and slammed into him, growing in power and fury like a storm.

If there is ever going to be a time to turn that dream link into a weapon, that time is now.

Harry decided it was time to go to bed.

And hope like hell he dreamed.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Nineteen: On the Wings of War

Harry had never realized how hard it was to fall asleep deliberately. Of course, he couldn't remember ever being this desperate to do it before, even when he wanted Christmas or their birthday to come as a child so that he could see Connor open his presents. He lay with his hand clenched behind his head and waited for several minutes, not moving any of his muscles and breathing with perfect calm, and still nothing happened.

Well, when have I had the visions before?

That didn't answer the problem, though, because Harry knew full well he had tended to have the dreams at different times—when he was stressed, when he was relaxed, when he had expected nothing more than a night of ordinary sleep. He couldn't will or create a condition that would allow him to go to sleep and have a vision.

So reach through the scar link. It was what you planned to do when you were in Voldemort's head, anyway. Just do it now. Try to open it while you lie here.

Harry reached carefully through the shades and shadows of his own mind towards what he thought was the scar link, a piece of Occlumency-shaded pain that he didn't like to think about, and usually didn't until it exploded. Almost at once, he felt the warm, pulsing bond that Fawkes shared with him become active, and the phoenix appeared above his bed in a burst of light that brought complaints from Blaise and a sleepy half-mumble from Draco. Fawkes settled on his shoulder, the one where Argutus hadn't coiled, and warbled at him. In Harry's mind formed the distinct vision of not trying to go off and do anything by himself.

Even Regulus, whose connection with him grew fainter and fainter as more of McGonagall's work called him back to his body, was awake now, calling his name. *Harry! Harry, what are you doing?*

Harry grimly reached out and touched the scar link again. He *could* control it, he *could* bring it to life, he thought. He had simply never tried before, because he had never had the nerve.

Now he did. He should have had it some time since, because he was depending on it so much to help win this war, but he would forget about the guilt. He reached for it, and had a brief, flickering sensation of falling down a tunnel.

The warmth of his bond with Fawkes faded from his mind, and then the sound of the voice calling his name. Harry gathered his feet—they were paws, of course, which reassured him he had got *some* part of this right—and looked around, expecting to see Voldemort's bedroom, or maybe a pair of staring basilisk eyes or a gathering of Death Eaters.

Instead, he found himself in a very familiar stone corridor. Harry's whiskers twitched in surprise, and he gave a little hop forward; his missing left forepaw made him grateful that he wasn't missing a foot in his own body. This was Voldemort's mind, the tunnel that led to his imagined Chamber of Secrets. But why was he here? Had he not touched the right part of the link that bound them after all?

He considered, and dismissed, the idea that Voldemort would have allowed him to come this far only to trap him. This part of the corridor was too near the seat of the man's memory, which Harry had badly damaged before, sending him into a retreat and a coma for several days.

Harry wondered if lynxes could grin devilishly. If they could, then he would be doing so now. He didn't quite know how he had

come here, but as long as he was here, then he could hurt Voldemort. He began working his way forward, past the mass of bones that announced the entrance to the Chamber.

A disturbance in the mind, shifting in the pool, and he lost track of what Bella was saying about their allies. He leaned back his head and closed his eyes, and he located the stirring at once, because was he not a master Legilimens? It would have been beneath him to take longer than a moment, and no one would ever say that Voldemort, the proper Dark Lord of Britain, had taken longer than a moment.

The presence was within his mind, close to the seat of his memories, and moving forwards with definite hostile intent.

Potter. There was no question in him, even before he saw the cat-form that Evan had told him had watched their plans several times. No other would have been so impudent as to bring pain and destruction here. Potter did not know what was right, or what was beautiful, and that included the sanctity of a Dark Lord's mind.

Of course, he had Potter on his own ground, and he, Lord Voldemort, was aware of him. That meant he could crush him to death in his mind, tightening the walls of the tunnel around him, and Potter would perish. It would take only a moment.

But that was not the way one of his enemies ought to die. It was not right, and it was not beautiful. He, Lord Voldemort, could feel himself smiling. He would show Potter how a true Lord treated his most persistent foes.

He reached, gently, down the tunnel that bound them both together, and then slipped inside Potter's mind, even as Potter padded through his.

Harry paused and flicked his ears. He'd had the impression that something had just brushed against his head and stung him lightly, like a biting fly, but he knew that nothing lived in this part of Voldemort's head, so he decided he might have imagined it. Or perhaps the sensations that lingered in another mind, when he had time to notice them and wasn't engaged in a frantic search for some way of crippling that mind's possessor, were different from those in the physical world. After all, he imagined most of the things he felt here, and his thoughts were prone to go in many strange directions.

He rounded the final corner before the doors to the Chamber, and then flattened himself to the ground and snarled. Before him, overwhelming the corridor, were the black-purple, overlapping coils of an immense snake. Voldemort had obviously imagined this guardian since the last time and put it here to protect his memory. Merlin knew what it was in reality—some sophisticated Occlumency technique, probably.

Harry shot his claws. He thought he could take the snake, with as much mental flexibility as he himself had, but he would prefer not to fight. He could make out no head, which made him think it was buried somewhere in those coils, and the snake might be asleep. If that was the case, then he could creep by with his back against the wall, and perhaps the giant creature would never notice him.

There was a slight corridor of clear stone and air to the left. Harry walked towards it, his claws retracting, grateful, and not for the first time, that his form here was feline. He could never have managed so soft a walk as he did on these padded paws, and the lynx body was much lighter than this own.

All seemed to be going well until he tried to take a step forward and found himself unable to move. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering what had trapped him.

He found a coil he hadn't even felt draped over his back, twitching slightly. It had the look of one near the tail, and, in fact, one end of it did first taper and then swell, into a purple bulb that Harry thought was a rattle.

It began to shake as he watched, and then the body in front of him moved gently and lazily, the head lifting out of the middle. Harry flattened himself, and let the magic he possessed here swell around him. He was healthy now, able to use his own power, which hadn't been the case the last time he was in Voldemort's mind. Besides, if the snake could touch him, then he could touch the snake, so he wouldn't be reduced to the frustrated impotency of vision.

The snake's head was a beautiful thing, moving slowly from side to side, much like the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry

saw no hint of a killing yellow gaze when it met his eyes, though, only one as deep a green as the forest of his own mind had once been. He hissed and prepared to spring.

The snake opened its mouth first, and loosed a cloudy spray of poison that darkened the tunnel and fell in a stinging spray upon Harry.

Pain like acid dug into his sides and shoulders, and Harry screamed.

He felt his impudent enemy scream, and smiled in satisfaction. Then he was fully within his adversary's mind. He expected to see the hedge-maze he had taken such great delight in defiling last time. And he remembered the darting boy who had been the center and heart of Potter's sanity. This time, he would make sure to torture that boy, and let Potter watch it.

But there was no hedge-maze. There was no green and rustling depth that watched the Lord Voldemort suspiciously and tried to overwhelm him with stubborn, fragile life. Instead, Lord Voldemort found himself standing on one great metallic branch, one of many projecting from a slender tree of steel, which spread in all directions around him and rose up and out of sight.

Scan, turn his head, look carefully, tilt his head. Still the impression around him did not change. If it was an illusion that Potter had fabricated to conceal the reality of his mind—but no, any illusion would have shattered by now before the gaze of the great and mighty Lord Voldemort. This was the reality of his mind.

The metallic tree did bear living leaves, green shoots embedded in the steel, but not all of them were done growing. And around the Lord Voldemort was not emptiness, but darkness, constellations of memories and emotions and truths, with spaces that Potter had left blank to fill later. It looked for all the world like he had ripped down and rebuilt his mind, but that was not true, could not be true, because Legilimency could not be employed that way, and no wizard would attack his own thoughts.

He could only think that somehow, Potter *had* hit on an illusion that defied him, one that only seemed the more and more solid the more he looked, and his body was cold with rage and the rage was magnificent.

He heard a rustling sound above him, and glanced up. There was a small shape swinging on the branch above him. Lord Voldemort had no doubt that that was Potter's sanity. He would not have woven the illusion that well, then, and the boy was, on some level, no doubt, still running through a hedge-maze.

The Lord Voldemort aimed his wand.

And then Potter was in his mind with him, and things briefly became confused and then very chaotic.

Harry writhed, the pain of the venom worse than any he had experienced—

Well, no, that was not quite true. Whenever he was tempted to make extravagant comparisons, he remembered the pain of his left hand being cut off, and then he usually dropped them.

Still, he knew he couldn't stay here. He had to flee. The poison would kill him if he remained. It was frustrating to be forced to flee when he knew that Voldemort's most vulnerable memories were only a few spaces of thought away, but he could not reach them, and he would not die for this.

He jumped back to his own mind.

He became aware of the intruder at once. Voldemort had made no effort to disguise his presence, in the way that Harry had. He was caught out in the open, and he was taking aim at something, probably Harry's sanity or memories. Harry took in that much at a glance.

Then Voldemort became aware of him, and their perceptions twisted and bounded as they regarded each other. They had never been in such close contact before. When they first journeyed into each other's minds, they had left barely any awareness in their own thoughts, and Harry had always seen himself in the physical world when he was close to Voldemort in the visions.

Harry recovered first. And since he was on his home ground, his imaginings of what could happen here, his conceptions of possibility, were the stronger. He was used to his own mind. He knew what he usually thought about. He imagined Voldemort trapped, pinned, crushed and held down, unable to escape and get out of sight.

Voldemort, of course, slithered free of the trap, though not without a hiss of pain. He was concentrating on hiding himself now, but what Dumbledore had once told Harry held true: he was not as good an Occlumens as he was a Legilimens. Harry used that against him, turning the whole of his mind into transparent representations of the metallic tree and the silver pools that hovered around it, easily showing him the writhing wisp of Voldemort's alien intrusion.

From the Dark Lord came compulsion, like a blowing wind, trying to grab and control Harry.

And the whole of Harry's mind rose in revolt against *that*.

He heard himself snarl, and honestly wasn't sure if it had only happened in his head, or if he had done it physically. This time, he imagined arrows going after Voldemort, spike after spike of pain and hatred, pinning him and striking him and filling him with the same kind of agony that the snake's poison had given Harry. Gone were the thoughts of holding him prisoner or trying to figure out how the link between them worked. Harry only wanted him out of his head, now. Compulsion, a binding on his will, was not to be tolerated.

He heard, more distinctly this time, the hiss of pain, and then Voldemort said in that high cold voice Harry thought of as the embodiment of nightmare, "*You have not killed me. I cannot be killed.*"

Harry didn't bother to answer. The warmth of his bond with Fawkes was rising around him now, and then the phoenix was there, flapping his wings strongly in Harry's head, the sunlight showering down. Voldemort could perhaps have stayed and fought, but he obviously saw no reason to challenge the fire of a phoenix. In moments, he was gone, slipped free from Harry's mind and back down the link to his own body.

The madness of his revulsion faded a moment later, and Harry lay panting, taking stock of his pain. He knew that some of his control over his emotions had been abraded; that was probably the practical effect of the snake's venom. He knew that his head felt simultaneously as if it were splitting and as if it were on fire—his scar again. But nothing else was hurt.

He rose slowly out of the dream, to find Fawkes sitting on his chest, Argutus curled up near his face, and Draco shaking him frantically. Regulus's voice lurched in and out of hearing, as if he were on a distant ship and calling to Harry through the wind and the waves. *—hear me? Harry? Can you—damn it, don't do this—*

I'm all right, Harry thought at him, and then ran his hand through the blood that slid down his cheek, grimacing. He hadn't had a vision that made his scar open like this for a while. He sighed and sat up slowly, rubbing at his face and trying to decide whether he should attempt medical magic on his head or not.

Draco didn't give him the chance to, since his worry had already gone straight into anger. "That was another stupid mistake, Harry," he said. "Wasn't it? I could feel what you were doing, although not see it clearly. It was like I was along for a ride in a dream."

Harry stared at him. *Damn. Is this a side effect of his having possession? Or perhaps just a side effect of him practicing his possession in my head and only my head so far?*

"I felt the pain," said Draco evenly, and then touched the side of his head. For the first time, Harry became aware that there was blood staining the white-blond hair, as if Draco had a lightning bolt scar of his own in a different place. "Good work, that," Draco said, and the drawl in his voice wasn't one Harry had heard in a long time. "You'll find ways to punish the people who love you even lying flat on your back in a bed, Harry. I can't wait for the day when you'll manage to make me bleed while you're brushing your teeth in the morning. *That's* something to look forward to."

"I didn't know that was going to happen!" The words broke forth from Harry, sparking from between his lips, before he could stop them. He immediately ducked his head and turned away, breathing harshly. He tried to slide the emotions into the Occlumency pools, but they weren't accepting them. He supposed that was of a piece with his degraded emotional control. He knew, he knew, he should be quiet, but it was hard when Draco went on.

"No, you didn't. But you knew it was a stupid idea to go hunting for Voldemort with your mind, and you did it anyway, without even warning me that it was a possibility. Why, Harry? Normally, you're not stupid." Draco paused. "Well, not as stupid as this,

anyway,” he corrected himself, with a small sigh.

“Will you *shut up*?” Blaise asked from the other side of the room. “We have Potions first thing tomorrow, and *some* of us can’t count on the favor of the professor to make it through the class without doing anything.”

Harry really, really didn’t need the reminder that he would have to face Snape with his shields down in just a few hours. He put his head between his knees, and forced himself to concentrate on nothing more than the breath sliding in and out of his lungs. Fawkes, who’d fluttered up to sit on the pillow, let out a long, moaning note, and Argutus flickered his tongue out to catch one of the tears on Harry’s cheeks.

“*You cry from pain,*” he noted. “*You cry from anger. You cry from fear. I wonder if there is any emotion that you do not express by crying? What is it? I would like to know. The tears taste good. Do they always?*”

“They always taste the same, I think,” Harry whispered back in Parseltongue. “And no, I don’t think there’s any emotion that I don’t cry from.”

The intense pain in his head was finally beginning to recede, though his scar still felt like a fresh brand. Harry gathered himself with a small shake. He had deserved what Draco said, and he knew it. And he absolutely had to get his control back, or Merlin knew what would happen when he faced Snape.

Well, no, it didn’t have to be just Merlin who would know. *Harry* knew. And it would be a scene of shouting, and quite correct accusations of childishness, and then Snape would go on thinking that he needed a guardian after all, even if Harry didn’t end up forgiving him before the class was done. A scene like this would not do wonders for Harry’s independent appearance and sense of good judgment.

His emotions shifted and wavered again, and the next one that surfaced struck Harry dumb with astonishment, though a moment before he’d been ready to apologize to Draco. He watched, from the distance that Snape had taught him with regard to his own mind, as it rushed through him and made him shake.

Need. Longing. Loneliness. He really just wanted to lean against someone for right now and let them take care of everything, wanted to go to sleep with no worries and rise up in the knowledge that that other person had helped arrange everything so that they would handle it, together.

Of all the emotions he could feel at the moment, this was the most dangerous, Harry knew, the one that could most easily lead to him reaching for that help. He was furious with himself for feeling it.

But no, no, he couldn’t be furious, because that would just result in yelling at Draco, who didn’t deserve it, and it was another opportunity for his mind to feed on wild and raw feeling. Harry had known how to master that feeling since long before he learned Occlumency. His training was no longer as instinctive as it had once been, but he remembered it.

He focused his entire attention on something else, let the smallness of his own need drown in the intensity and interest of that focus, and felt the tension ebb out of his body. He lifted his head and smiled at Draco, who just stared back at him, apparently thrown off stride by Harry’s reaction.

“You were right,” Harry whispered. “That was stupid of me. I won’t do it again. I’m sorry.” He sighed. “I endangered my own life, or at least my own sanity, and accomplished nothing. And now that I know some of the dangers of the possession gift, it would be completely irresponsible of me to do it again, since I would willingly pull you along with me.” He took up Draco’s hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Draco tore free. “You know that I’m still angry with you,” he said.

Harry nodded. “I know.”

“You know that I still think you could do that again, and that I won’t really trust you not to repeat it for a while.”

“I know.”

Draco just frowned a little more, and then turned and walked back to his bed. “Clean the blood off your face, for Merlin’s sake,” he added, over his shoulder. “Unless you want to go down to breakfast like that in the morning and scare the first-years. And

you're already doing a good enough job of frightening people.”

Harry stayed still for a long moment, listening to Draco's sheets rustle as he climbed back into them, and hearing Fawkes croon, so distressed that only tattered visions from the sound appeared in Harry's head. When he was sure that he was calm, he climbed out of bed and went into the loo.

The sight of his own face in the mirror made him shake his head—blood-streaked, pale, grave. He'd failed, and yes, that *had* been a stupid idea. Since he hadn't accomplished anything, he could agree with Draco in that much. Insane risks should pay off.

But he took heart in the determination shining behind the defeat. At least he hadn't lost much, either. Even the pain from his scar was fading now. The worst that could happen was that Voldemort would try to exploit the link between them again, and this time Harry would be ready. More likely, he thought, the Dark Lord would leave it open, trying to lure Harry into entering his mind and a trap once more.

“I'll help Draco train his possession gift,” he whispered to the reflection as he washed the blood off. “Who knows what he might be able to achieve, riding beside me in my dreams that way? Maybe even possessing Voldemort. And it'll show that I do trust him.”

He went back to bed with twin goals: keeping a close watch on Draco tomorrow, so that he could know how he might make this mistake up to him, and keeping a close watch on himself. Harry did fear Draco's disappointment and anger, but more than that, he feared that that drowning need for companionship and protection would surface again.

It was his own nature that might make him forgive Snape before he was ready. Harry was master of himself, though, not the other way around, and no childish emotions were going to make him do what they wanted. He could so be a rational human being, an adult who could treat with other adults on equal footing and needed no one to guard him or injure others in the guarding of him. They would see.

“The first day is always a challenge, as I see how much you have forgotten over the summer.” Snape was stalking in a circle around the classroom, his eyes lingering over the newly mixed group in the dungeon. Draco and Harry were still together, a fact that Harry found himself deeply grateful for, but Connor and Hermione were missing Ron, and in the back of the room sat Blaise, Padma Patil, a few other Ravenclaw girls whom Harry didn't know, Zacharias, Hannah, and Justin. “You will pull out your books and brew the potion on page 183.” He had a slight smirk curling the corners of his mouth. Once, Harry would have found that intriguing, as he wondered what about the potion on page 183 was so awful that most people would have trouble brewing it.

Now, he felt only a faint stir of interest. Snape was outside him, no more important to him than any other professor. Granted, he was Harry's Head of House, but Harry refused to think that he had to find him interesting for that reason. Harry intended to go to Remus if he really felt that he needed to talk to an adult, and of course there was always the Headmistress, if it was just something as simple as preventing reporters from getting onto Hogwarts grounds.

He checked page 183 of the Potions book; he and Draco had partnered up, of course, leaving poor Blaise to pair with Padma. He saw the problem almost at once—or well, what would be a problem for most of the students in the class except him, Draco, and Hermione. The potion, which depended on numerical mysticism and was supposed to make it easier to calculate equations in one's head, required twice as much stirring as normal, and it went in alternating directions, once clockwise, once counter, twice clockwise, twice counter, and so on. One mistake in the count would mess up the whole potion.

“Do you want me to go get the ingredients?” Harry asked Draco. He could feel Snape looking at him, and then away. Now he was prowling the back of the classroom, pausing to check Justin's cauldron and, from the sound of it, make a few sarcastic remarks.

“I don't think so,” said Draco.

Harry blinked. “Why not?” Draco had an odd note in his voice, and he rose and leaned towards Harry as if he had some great confidence to impart. Harry watched him with a wrinkled brow. He'd apologized during breakfast, where other people could hear him, and endured much good-natured teasing from the others about what he might have to apologize to Draco for. He'd made it abundantly clear, on the private moments during the walk to Potions class, that he wasn't about to do anything like that again. He'd already sent Hedwig with a note to McGonagall, explaining the trick that Mulciber had pulled last year and that he'd tried to do something about crippling Voldemort, but been unable to.

“Because I don’t think having you that close to Snape would be a good idea right now,” said Draco simply.

Harry blinked, smiled, and relaxed. So it wasn’t that Draco thought him in the wrong after all. He was merely trying to protect Harry. “He’s going to come over and want to see our potion eventually, you know,” he said.

“I know. But I think we can wait for him to come to us.” Draco’s hand squeezed his shoulder, and then he slipped off to the storage area to get their ingredients. Harry started preparing the cauldron.

He was involved in what he was doing, but he had known Snape for years now, and had had time to get used to the feel of his magic and the weight of his eyes. He knew long before Snape said anything that he was standing behind his chair, watching him.

“It seems that you’re taking a long time over the cauldron, Potter,” said Snape, a neutral observation. “Odd, for someone of your skill in this subject.”

Harry readied himself. He remembered that the worst thing he could do would be to betray excess emotion. So long as he didn’t let Snape get to him, then he would win this strange little game they were playing. He would have preferred it if Snape had just ignored him—he could have respected Snape for that—but he wanted to put Harry in emotional mazes, as he had with his odd statements about missing him in the Headmistress’s office the other day. Harry would thread the mazes and come out again.

He turned around and simply nodded at Snape, wearing the same face as he would have in Transfiguration or Herbology. “Professor Snape, sir,” he said. “I know that this particular potion can stick to the sides of the cauldron if one isn’t careful, so I wanted to cast the appropriate spells so it wouldn’t.” He held his hand over the inside surface and concentrated. The metal gleamed a moment later with the sheen of the spell settling into place. Harry thought a moment, then added one so that the ingredients wouldn’t clump, also a danger with this potion.

“Impressive, Mr. Potter,” Snape murmured. “Five points to Slytherin.”

Harry just nodded. Let any other teacher assign him points for his House, and he would accept them. Snape was just another teacher.

“I wonder,” Snape went on meditatively, “if other students will think to do that?”

Harry shrugged. “You could always tell them, sir.”

“Ah,” said Snape, his eyes focused intently on Harry. “But I prefer to use some potions as a test of more than just ordinary brewing skill. They often let me see which students of mine possess unusual intelligence or aptitude.”

There is no reason, Harry told himself, for you to be shaking inside, and so he didn’t shake. He just nodded and murmured, “That’s very interesting, sir.”

He looked to the side as Draco approached with the three different kinds of stones they needed to crush for the potion, and smiled at him. He could feel Snape’s wondering stare on the back of his neck.

This isn’t that hard, Harry thought, as he began to crush the first stone in his pestle, bracing its base against the stump of his left hand. Snape makes his own rules, of course, but I can make my own, too. And I was acting like a child yesterday. So long as I keep the sarcastic comments and the emotional outbursts to myself, then some kind of bond might come back sooner, because I’ll convince him that I’m not a child, and so he can’t be a guardian.

Harry stepped out onto the grounds after dinner and stretched his arms over his head, yawning. It was an unexpectedly sunny day for September, and not chilly, yet. Harry couldn’t think of any better day to meet outside for the first formal assembly of their little dueling club. He was tired of abandoned classrooms, and this would give them a chance to discuss the meeting place and decide on a permanent one.

He walked towards the lake, more aware of the absence at his right shoulder than he wanted to be. Draco had excused himself from the dueling club on the grounds that he needed to look up a few more Arithmancy calculations for the next spell he wanted to perfect. Of course Harry hoped he had fun—and didn’t get himself trapped in a rune circle this time—but he felt a bit lonely.

Stop it. You do not.

He still hadn't managed to slide his emotions all the way beneath the Occlumency pools yet, but he could concentrate on something else, and then he would stop feeling the way he did. Right now, he was concentrating on the unexpectedly large number of students gathered around the lake, some sitting, some standing, most talking quietly. They turned their heads as he came up to stand on the fringes of the group, and Harry shifted as he felt the intensity of their eyes.

There was an uninvited guest, too, as Harry found out when a loud cry interrupted his first attempt at speech. He looked up in annoyance. A white bird circled overhead, with another mocking screech, and then settled in a tree near the edge of the lake, fluffing its feathers at him. It was a gull, Harry saw, with dark shoulders and rather offensively bright eyes. It cocked its head at him and watched, then once again screamed when he opened his mouth.

Harry shrugged at it and went on. "All right. Most of you heard Zacharias Smith ask me about a dueling club, and some of you have been in the one we had last year." No more than half of the students there looked to have been regular attendees, though, Harry thought, as he met the eyes of people he knew only slightly or not at all. Cho Chang gave him a reassuring smile and a little wave from the middle of the Ravenclaw clump. After that, Harry used the trick of focusing more on those he did know to keep himself moving forward. "And you probably heard him ask me about offensive spells, too. I'll teach them to you."

He raised his eyebrows, and listened to the intense gasps that came from some of the people near the gull's tree. *Was that the official seat for people who didn't think I'd dare do what Zacharias asked of me?* "I'll teach them to you, if certain conditions are fulfilled," Harry emphasized. "First, if you practice them on other students outside the club and it's not a clear-cut case of defending yourself or a professor asking you to demonstrate, then you're out of the group. Permanently. Second, some of you will have to get permission from your parents to learn the Dark Arts spells—"

"You can't teach us *Dark Arts*," said a Ravenclaw girl Harry remembered distantly. He thought he'd had some trouble with her in second year, when she'd got upset with him for hexing one of her Housemates. Harry winced as he remembered Tom Riddle, in his head, turning the girl's hex back on her and sending her to the hospital wing. Her name was Margaret, he thought, and she had an impressive glare. "That's against the school rules."

Harry had prepared for that. All he'd had to do was ask Hermione, and she'd gone digging for the answer during lunch and given it to him at dinner. "Not technically, it isn't," he said. "Or we wouldn't have been able to learn them in Defense Against the Dark Arts last year. What it *does* mean is that we have to keep it in the class, and it has to be a teacher-student situation. And the parents have to agree to let their children learn them. There's a blanket exception for Defense, always has been. But if a student is younger than sixth year, he or she has to have direct permission to learn them anywhere else."

"That can't be right." Margaret looked ready to fight it out if need be. "How could that possibly be right? That's the kind of thing Headmaster Dumbledore fought to stop, the learning of Dark Arts at Hogwarts." She paused a moment later, as though she'd just realized what she'd said, but she gave Harry a hard, challenging glare.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Yes, he did," he said quietly. "But he permitted them again last year. The Headmistress told me that she would continue that policy for as long as the war was in motion." *And she isn't happy about it.* McGonagall had sent him a long, stiff note that both thanked him for his warning about the Muggleborn children and outlined exactly what she would and would not tolerate in his little dueling club. "Things are different now. We have to fight. And I'm going to assume that everyone here wants to learn to fight. If you don't, you can stay out of the Dark Arts lessons."

Margaret sat down with a huff and folded arms. Harry shook his head at her, and turned and looked at the others. "Third, we have to have someone nearby who can cast medical magic, just in case someone gets hurt." He looked over his shoulder, and smiled when he saw the figure striding across the lawn from Hogwarts. "That would be the professor who's agreed to help supervise us, Remus Lupin."

A few of the students shrank as Remus came up, but not many. Too many of them remembered him as more of a Defense professor than a werewolf. Remus smiled at them all, but saved especial smiles for Connor, who sat with Parvati's hand tightly in his at the edge of the lake, and Harry. Harry felt a small ball of tension uncurl in his stomach. He liked to have an excuse to spend time with Remus, without pretending that he needed to be cared for.

"So," Harry went on. "For tonight, I'm just going to show you standard defensive magic. And Remus agreed to duel me." He grinned at Remus and pulled out his wand. He would be teaching people who used their wands, after all.

"Duel, indeed," said Remus mildly, his own wand already in his grip. "I'm sure that it will be more like a demonstration in how to

lose, Harry, with all the losing on your side.” His amber eyes glowed with a relaxed playfulness that Harry could easily see irradiating his wolf form, too.

“Oh, you think so, do you?” Harry asked, and then pointed his wand straight at Remus. “*Tarantallegra!*”

Remus had a Shield Charm up before the spell was more than half out of Harry’s mouth, using it nonverbally. Several of the students who hadn’t yet learned nonverbal magic gasped. Harry grinned as his own hex came right back at him, and held out his stump, around which he’d cast *Haurio*, letting everyone see and hear him doing it. The small jade-green shield ate the hex, and Harry took a moment to explain, vaguely aware of Remus circling around him, but not thinking he’d do anything while Harry was giving a vital lesson to the others.

“The difference between the Absorption Charm and the Shield Charm is how much you want to wound the people around you,” he said. “*Protego* bounces the spell right back at the caster. But the Absorption Charm eats them. That means that you don’t have the spell to reflect back, of course, but when you’re trying not to hurt a friend on the battlefield, it’s the better choice.”

Remus abruptly spoke from the side. “*Pedica!*”

Harry found himself trying to fight his limbs free of an invisible, snapping, flailing net, which was just as determined to snare and hold him. The Snare Spell did that, fiercer and nastier than any Body-Bind, and especially useful with holding a moving opponent; it would chase someone even if he moved away from the site of the spell.

Remus means it, then. The thought made gladness grow in Harry. He could use a little exercise.

He thought *Finite Incantatem!* At the same time, he cast, “*Clangor incommodus!*”

Remus promptly winced and clapped his hands over his ears. They would be buzzing and ringing, Harry knew, probably with a sound of many bells. And since Remus had a werewolf’s hearing, they would bother him even more than an ordinary wizard. It was a wonder that he managed to cast the next spell at all.

“*Stupefy!*”

A wonder, but not a wonderful spell, Harry thought as he rolled away from it. Then, because Remus obviously hadn’t managed to shake off the sound yet, and he wanted to show the other students how easy it was to incapacitate someone with a relatively simple spell, he chose variations of the *Clangor incommodus* spell, targeting Remus’s eyes and nose.

Remus gave a pained sound when the spells took effect, doubtless seeing—because Harry had wanted it for him—dozens of disagreeable little flies and smelling the reek of carrion. Harry took the time to add in another explanation around his panting.

“Even though the spells are minor, each one piles another distraction on him that he has to deal with as he tries to cast the *Finite* to end them. And, of course, each one needs a new spell to get rid of it—“

“*Finite Incantatem!*”

Remus cast so fiercely that Harry suspected he was fully recovered. He started moving at once, hoping a few of the students would take lessons from the way he kept his head up and his feet never in the same place for long, but so occupied and so happy that he didn’t much care if they paid attention or not. He could always explain things again later. This was a good beginning for their club, anyway. Nothing like a practical demonstration.

Remus narrowed his eyes, and Harry knew his next spell would be nonverbal. He began whispering *Protego* over and over under his breath, concentrating the Shield Charms around the silver bracelet with the Malfoy and Black family mottos united that he wore on his right arm.

Remus’s spell came flying at him, a dark green ray that signaled a combination Harry had heard of Aurors using. It would both knock him unconscious and tie him up with ropes that no blade could cut.

If it hit, of course.

Harry lifted his arm, and the hex slammed into the combined Shield Charms on his bracelet. For a moment, the green light clung, shimmering, as if it would force its way through after all; it was a powerful spell, and Remus had doubtless been annoyed when

he cast it.

Then it turned around and flew back at Remus, who, a moment later, was stunned and tied up, the ropes binding his arms together behind his back and his legs out in front of him. Harry heard a few students gasping, others laughing or clapping, but most of them just stared in stunned silence.

Harry turned around and bowed his head. "Another useful defense is nested Shield Charms," he said casually. "They'll provide more strength and protection, even against really nasty hexes and Dark Arts, than just one will. Of course, you've got to have the time to cast them, and you have to be powerful to cast and maintain several in a row. Focusing them on an object helps." He displayed the bracelet, and thought, *Weaving them in between isolation wards at your old abandoned house works, too.*

"I want to know how to do that," Hermione demanded. "I've never heard of it."

Harry glanced at poor Remus. "Let me get Professor Lupin revived first, and then I'll teach you all you like," he said, and concentrated on making the ropes vanish and Remus return to consciousness. Remus was properly embarrassed about it all, but held no grudge, and settled down to working with the students who wanted to try the Absorption Charm. Harry kept an eye on them, and was satisfied that even those who first stared at Remus and trembled soon warmed up to him.

He kept making circles of the group, adjusting dueling partners when one of the pair got the spell right away or was too obviously powerful, patiently coaching Neville not to stutter on the *Protego* incantation, reminding two third-years who wanted to learn Dark Arts that he needed their parents' permission. It was on his fourth or fifth circle that he became aware of someone near the other side of the lake, watching, and turned to look.

He scowled when he saw Snape, and turned away. *He doesn't need to watch. I'm not going to get myself killed, not with Remus here. And he should go talk to Pansy, anyway. She needs his help, and she'd talk to him, since he's Head of Slytherin House.*

I think I'll suggest that to him when we have to go inside, in fact.

Harry would have felt better about his little joke if the speed with which darkness fell hadn't reminded him of the nearness of the autumnal equinox, and the attack that Voldemort intended to launch then.

Entertaining, Honoria Pemberley decided, stretching out her wings and shaking them once as she saw the dueling club breaking up to go back inside Hogwarts. *Our little leader is a good teacher, too.*

She'd carefully watched everything from the time she got there in her gull form—well, at least from the time she'd stopped deciding it was fun to interrupt Harry as he talked. Yes, he was a leader. He was alert enough to know when his opponent was going to cast a nonverbal spell, and to prepare an all-purpose defense against it. He faced and met challenges head-on. And even his very interesting scowl at the Potions Master didn't interrupt his pace or his talk; Harry's voice was still as low and placid, his stride as firm, as before. He really did like helping others, Honoria thought, as she saw him absorbed in the teaching. He went outside himself, forgot whatever troubles plagued him, and became more interested in others' efforts than Honoria had managed to be even when she was a student.

She wondered if that was such a good thing or not, then clacked her beak. *Tybalt and John and I will just watch out for him if he can't watch out for himself.*

She took off across the lake, debating her course as she went. Shoulder or hair? Shoulder or hair?

In the end, the wind made the decision for her as she passed above the Potions Master and lifted her tail. The white splatter she meant to hit his hair blew sideways and struck the shoulder of his robes instead. Snape reared back, glaring, and pointed his wand at her, but Honoria was already out of reach, cackling the gull-laughter she knew most people despised.

That's for too many Potions exams that you marked down, she thought, as she wheeled home, *as well as for whatever upset you've caused our beloved and glorious leader.*

She couldn't wait to get home and contact Tybalt. He would wonder how she got onto Hogwarts grounds and stayed there so undetected.

Honoria would smile, and smile, and never tell.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty: Like a Very Chiron

Harry could not say how relieved he was when Acies finally swept into the Defense classroom. He was sure that these mixed classes of McGonagall's were a good idea. He could cling to that in the abstract, and, of course, he could always take comfort in the fact that there were a few other Slytherins with him; McGonagall seemed to have arranged things so that Harry always attended class with at least two of his yearmates.

But for him personally, most of the classes were a stew of violent emotion. There were always people with pity on their faces. There were a few people who asked him each time why he had accused Dumbledore of child abuse, why it couldn't have been handled more quietly, and their numbers were growing. There were those who grumbled and muttered and questioned why Harry himself appeared to have been so instrumental in the Dark Lord's return, and Harry thought he could almost see their emotions spreading from one to another like a disease. He would have thought it was a spell, but no spell he knew of answered the description of this.

He put most of the emotions down to his oversensitivity, which thought any mutter lately had to do with him, and did his best to relax and calm himself. But Defense, he knew, was going to be particularly bad, and it was only the first class they'd had. Margaret from Ravenclaw was in that class, and Millicent and Pansy, but not Draco. Margaret was stirring up suspicion of him, currently, by telling others that Harry intended to teach Dark Arts in the meetings of the dueling club, and Pansy was a cold stiff presence at his side.

Harry could feel himself relax when Acies walked through the door. She was still wearing the pale, gown-like robes she had since the first day at school, but this time, Harry could see that the sleeves were tipped with green, a Slytherin color. He frowned, wondering how many people would note the subtle symbolism, both of the hue and of the two colors working together. Together, they signaled the end of winter and the coming of spring.

Never mind that this is entirely the wrong season of the year to be wearing them, Harry thought, and lifted his eyes to Acies's face. For just a moment, her gaze met his—not enough to flash the wild power he knew was in it down his throat. Instead, Acies turned away and paced to the front of the room. Most of the students were silent, watching her. Harry knew they were curious about this Professor Merryweather. The reports coming out of the other classes had been strangely mixed. Some of them liked her, and some of them were terrified.

"I will ask you to tell me," Acies said abruptly, voice breaking the silence with a low hiss, "what you know of the nature of sacrifice."

Harry told himself that most heads did not turn to look at him. That was just his oversensitivity at work again.

Pansy clasped his arm. Harry leaned towards her, and she said into his ear, "I wish you to tell the professor that I know sacrifice very well. It is at the core of the necromantic arts. Without giving up our ability to speak, and our names, and our connections with the outside world, we would not gain the privilege and honor of speaking with the dead." She paused, with a slight sneer. "Make sure that she knows the answer comes from me."

Harry nodded, and then turned towards Acies and raised his hand. More people stared. Harry ignored that, and concentrated on not looking Acies too directly in the face when she called on him, relating what Pansy had said word for word.

"Three points to Slytherin," said Acies, and that was another thing they had heard about her, Harry remembered, that she always gave points in threes. "Ask Miss Parkinson if she knows *why* giving up these particular sacrifices is so powerful, Mr. Potter."

Pansy was ready with the answer when Harry turned to her. "Because they're things that normal people can't do, and necromancers have to give up being normal people."

Acies just shook her head when Harry repeated that, though. "No. Any sacrifice would do. These happen to be the ones that the studies demand, and have demanded over long years, so that they are hallowed by tradition. But the most important nature of the sacrifices, one way to separate them from what the Dark Lord did in cutting Mr. Potter's hand off, is their willingness. A willing sacrifice is always more powerful."

Harry flushed as more people turned to look at him, but kept his head high. He'd been the one who chose not to wear a glamour.

And what Acies was saying made sense, and was ancient magical theory. A shame so many people, even Margaret from Ravenclaw, were scrambling to write it down as if it were new, he thought.

"A life laid down," Acies said, pacing back and forth in front of the class with a swirl of her robes, "a limb cut off willingly, a privilege yielded without grumbling, forms the corner and the core of all sacrifices that most wizards trust. Without that corner and that core, sacrifice is usually seen as evil, or, at most, dubious magic. What can be done with blood and flesh and other things not given willingly? A great deal, but not as much as can be done with that yielded. The wizard's will adds its own sanction to the spell or the potion or the ritual performed with that willing sacrifice." Her eyes lingered on Harry's face for a moment. "The one the sacrifice is performed for grows more willing himself, more able, more powerful. Perhaps he will even be able to survive whatever storm comes after that yielding."

Harry's heart was beating oddly. Though he had lived with sacrifice all his life, he hadn't thought about that particular aspect in any depth, no more than he thought about making wands because he carried one. He wondered, in a sudden, searing realization, if Sirius's and Sylarana's willingly given lives had been one reason he was able to fight and defeat Voldemort after they died.

"I want you, all of you," said Acies, "to think about what you have given up yourself, and whether it was willing or not. Make me a list." She drew a parchment from no place Harry could see, perhaps one of the long sleeves, and slammed it down in the middle of the table before her. "Tell me *now*."

More people scrambled for quills, Harry among them. He braced the paper with the stump of his left hand and began to write. Some of them, like his hand and the loss of time to help other people, were easy.

Others, he had to think about. Was it really a sacrifice, for example, what he had done for Connor? Sometimes it seemed that way, and sometimes it seemed as though it could not have been because he'd been tricked into it, not allowed to truly make up his mind about what he wanted to yield to help his brother. But that would just be an unwilling sacrifice, he supposed. He bit his lip and wrote.

"Read your list aloud to me," said Acies after about five minutes, and pointed a finger at the back of the classroom. "You."

Harry turned, and was distantly amused to see that Acies had called on Margaret. She flushed and started to read in a mumble, but Acies cut her off. "Stand and read in a loud, clear voice," she said. "I will not have you crouch in a corner and talk as if you are ashamed. This class is not the place for anyone ashamed of what they are. You have made sacrifices, taken from you or willingly laid down. We are going to talk about them in a spirit of defiance and pride."

Sidelong glances towards Professor Merryweather were becoming more and more frequent. Harry could see now why everyone, from the sixth-year students to the first-years, had such a mixed opinion of her. Some would regard her with awe. Some would think she wasn't being serious and would look for the joke, only to realize slowly that there wasn't one.

Margaret coughed, and stood. She began to read out an ordinary litany of parents' time surrendered to younger siblings, toys broken or lost, privileges revoked when she'd become sulky. Harry tried to listen, but most of his attention was on Acies, standing with her hands behind her back like a soldier.

Then Margaret read out, "And a day's time of study and classes lost in my second year, because Potter cast my hex back at me, and sent me to the hospital wing." She lowered her list and scowled at Harry.

Harry looked back at her. He didn't know what to say. But then, lately, that wasn't an uncommon occurrence. With Snape and with Draco, he didn't know what to say, either, and as he watched McGonagall's face grow grimmer over breakfast and Fawkes scolded him for his foolishness in entering Voldemort's mind every day, he felt increasingly lost.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry blinked and glanced over at Acies. "Yes, Professor Merryweather?" He was glad that he'd practiced her name, or he would probably have called her Professor Lestrangle without thought. It wasn't every Light witch that could look that commanding.

"What Miss Parsons says," said Acies implacably. "Is it true? Did you cause her to lose a day of her time in the hospital wing?"

Harry was grateful just to be able to say a solid, “Yes,” without wavering. That part of it was objective fact, and most people knew it, though right now they were murmuring as if the reminder could not have come at a worse—or better—time. He waited, never looking away from Acies, even to meet Margaret’s glare.

For a moment, he caught a glimpse of dragon. Then Acies looked back at Margaret, and asked, “And what were your motives for doing so, Mr. Potter?”

Here’s the tricky part. But Harry knew that if he lied now, or even said anything less evil than the truth, no one would believe him. And even after just a week, he was sick of drifting frantically among the shards of his emotions and wondering what to say. Everyone—Draco, Snape, Remus, Argutus, Fawkes, Pansy, Regulus—advised something different, told him that *I’m sorry* wasn’t enough but wanted it said, or desired something from him that Harry didn’t know how to give, mostly Snape. Harry had kept this weakness quiet, since every time he did reach out, he got all those contradictory answers.

“At the time, I was possessed,” he said quietly. “That was the year several students were paralyzed and placed in the hospital wing. For the first part of the year, I carried the possessor, Tom Riddle, in my head. He was the one who turned the hex. I didn’t know how to do it.”

The class buzzed and sang. Harry sat still and watched Acies’s eyes.

“*Liar,*” said Margaret loudly, stirring a bit of anger in Harry. He had spoken the truth. What did she want or expect him to say? That he’d hated her personally, enough to want to hex her into pain? “You don’t need another presence in your head to want to do that,” she continued. “You carry enough evil to do it all on your own.”

Harry wondered if he should say something in response to that—both Millicent and Pansy were staring at him as if he should—but Acies got to it first, as she swung her head crisply around to face Margaret.

“You cannot lie to me,” she said. “None of you can lie to me. My eyes see truth. I am named for insight, keenness of mind. And I know that you do not believe what you are saying right now, Miss Parsons. I see the lie resting in your mind, the frightened worm crouching behind your eyes. You heard the rumors of possession later in the year, and believed them.

“Even as Mr. Potter should respect your sacrifice, and know what he cost other people around him, you should respect his, and know what evil he was condemned to carry in his head. Making a sacrifice does not exempt you from acknowledging that other people have done the same.” Acies held her hand above her head, and her fingers began moving oddly, as though something were trapped in her palm. Harry saw a feathered head project above her knuckles a moment later, and then a green bird was perched there, a bird whose feathers, if you looked at them too closely, resembled scales. It had a blue crest of feathers, which it laid back as it screamed at the startled students, and brilliant red eyes, mad in the way that only a bird’s eyes could be mad. It took off and fluttered towards the ceiling of the room, not distracting attention from Acies’s words but seeming to draw the students back towards them.

“I created that bird from my magic. If any of you were to destroy it now, you would be wasting my sacrifice and not respecting it.

“This is what we are prone to forget. As we move through the world, caught up in what we have given and will give, we forget that others have made sacrifices similar to ours, sometimes larger, sometimes more willing. We compare, and always find ourselves in the favored positions, those who have given the most and deserve to be treated with the most respect. Or we degrade ourselves, and say that others have given more, but imagine that some reward for the degradation still awaits us. We will show them, someday. Someday, the people we gave up the sacrifices for will turn to us with tears and love in their eyes. The idea of future reward makes far too many gifts less valuable than they should be.

“Remembering that sacrifice lies everywhere, threaded and torn through every soul, and forgetting to compare, is what I will teach you this term.”

The green bird dropped down from the ceiling and circled Acies’s head. She lifted up her arms. For a moment, just a moment, Harry had the impression that the shadow of enormous wings was passing over him, even though he could not actually see it. He saw the way Acies looked at the bird, and knew one of her sacrifices, at that moment, as surely as if she had told him.

Acies carried part of a dragon within her, and with that, she had given up part of what it meant to be human.

Harry closed his eyes. Awe, an emotion he hadn’t felt in far too long a time, was beating in his ears like a drum. He had been lifted and transported out of himself, far away from the confusing, dizzying assault of emotions, and he had badly needed it. For a

moment, he thought he could catch a glimpse of the gifts and the sacrifices around him, and he was filled with wonder.

“On Thursday,” said Acies, “I will begin to teach you the meaning of sacrificial ethics, and how easily they can be twisted, and what the Dark Arts do to those who give up too much of themselves. Class dismissed.”

Harry shook his head and slowly stood, still caught in a waking dream. Thus, it did not seem strange when Millicent, whom he’d asked to be his delegate to the centaurs last year, leaned over to him and whispered, “Potter, one of the centaurs contacted me this morning. He wants you to meet with him in the Forbidden Forest at sunset tonight. His name is Firenze.”

“I know him,” Harry said, and felt his heart pick up the pace, bounding, quickening. He did not know what the centaurs wanted, but at the moment, he felt more bound to them than he had in a long time—and with no evil, wizard-planted web, either, but with the common interest he’d once told the Seer Vera he felt. The wonder, that other people existed in the world and were what they were, beat in his throat like a second pulse.

On the way out of the classroom, he glanced at Acies. She had the green bird in her hands, and was staring at it. She smelled of smoke and fire, and one of her sleeves was partially singed away.

Harry smiled slightly. He suspected that a mixed report of this class would spread around, too.

Harry walked calmly through the edge of the Forest, Draco at his side. He’d told Draco what he intended to do at sunset, and asked if he wanted to come with him. Draco had chosen to do so at once, though scolding Harry, all the while, about taking another potentially stupid risk.

The words rolled off Harry as they would not have only a few hours earlier. He was remembering Draco’s own sacrifices, the danger he’d put him in by going into Voldemort’s mind a week ago, and feeling his affection surge, keen and strong as sunlight on the waves. *That* was the best reason to avoid taking that kind of risk. Not because someone else would be angry at him if he did something stupid, but because he knew it would mark and endanger another person in a way that Harry didn’t want him marked and endangered. Add that it was Draco, and Harry wanted him to have even more freedom and choice than he might want for others, and Harry knew, with a quiet strength that impressed him, that that kind of risk would not be happening again.

The steady beat of hooves made Harry lift his head from the path of crumpled, faded leaves at his feet. The centaur Firenze stood in front of them, tail swishing slightly. He had a palomino body and blue eyes that marked and pierced Harry from where he stood. Harry stared back, and felt the double heartbeat of anticipation and wonder pick up in him.

“Harry Potter,” said Firenze. “The stars are bright tonight, and we have found how to lift our web.”

Harry had suspected something like this when Firenze took the trouble to notify Millicent. He didn’t shout out objections, like the one Scrimgeour had given him, about the centaurs raping people if they were freed. This was too sacred for that. He just nodded.

“Show me,” he said.

Firenze reared, planting his hooves solidly when he came down, and then wheeled and trotted into the Forest. Harry followed, feeling Draco, behind him, reach out and place a hand on the small of his back, much the way he had done when escorting him towards the dungeons last week. He smiled slightly and leaned into the pressure, but kept his eyes always ahead, on Firenze’s swishing, pale tail.

They turned away from the parts of the Forest that Harry was familiar with—the clearing where he had once dueled Voldemort, the bend in the path where he had seen Quirrell drinking unicorn’s blood, the hill where rocks like a gallows awaited. They walked for a long time, long enough that darkness fell and Harry called *Lumos* into being on the end of his wand. Draco kept muttering words, but they were low enough under his breath that Harry thought he was frightened.

He didn’t turn and reassure him, though. Draco wouldn’t want this kind of fear acknowledged.

At last, the trail dipped violently, and Harry realized they were heading into a wide hollow, on a considerably lower level than the rest of the Forest. Draco stumbled. Harry reached back, gripping his arm and holding him upright, even as he stared, trying to make out the dimensions of the place they’d come into.

The sides of it were stone, the tree roots running out about halfway down the wall. The more he looked, the more Harry thought those stones, though they looked natural, had still been cut and fitted into place. They shone fiercely, and here and there a rippling shadow like a four-legged shape slid across them and was gone. The path down into the made valley was also meant for a being with four legs and not two, Harry thought, as they carefully negotiated it. Draco had drawn his wand, but luckily wasn't aiming it at anything.

Firenze waited for them at the bottom of the trail. His hooves were planted deeply in lush grass that Harry could smell summer leaking from. He paused and looked up at Firenze in question.

"We were given this place," said Firenze, his voice seeming to echo from the stones. "We were not meant to stray from here. It is summer here, and there are enchanting sounds and sights that were supposed to contribute to keeping us prisoner." He reared, and he did not look at all like a horse—or, if he did, Harry thought, it was a warhorse, trained to bite and kick and trample, as dangerous as its rider. "We have not stayed here, but we find ourselves drawn back. That ends tonight." He walked towards the center of the valley.

Harry could sense the glammers trailing them as they followed. Glimpses of indescribable beauty appeared and brushed against his face—seas, high and lonely deserts, hills shining with rain. Draco's pace slackened once or twice, but Harry always pulled gently and got him moving again. Draco muttered each time, to say that he hadn't been fooled and was coming, just a minute.

Something awaited them in the middle of the valley. Harry studied it as they drew nearer, but only when they were a foot or two away from it did all the impressions seem to rush together and show him what it was at once.

A vaguely familiar chestnut centaur was kneeling between two upright stones, his forelegs folded under his chest. Ropes held up his arms and tied them to the stones. Harry remembered the noose that the centaurs had used on Draco that first year, and suspected that this was more of the same stuff. Above the stones, from one to the other, ran a metal crossbar, and more ropes extended from it, lashed around the centaur's hind legs, which were splayed behind him.

The centaur glanced up. Harry struggled to recall the name that belonged with those dark hair and blackberry eyes, and finally managed to say, "Coran."

"The same," said Coran. "You have come, *vates*, in sight of the stars and in sight of the stones."

The moment he finished speaking, a kind of magic Harry had never felt before sang out from the rocks. Harry shivered. This was not precisely music, but stabbing spikes of sound that drove in through his eyes and ears both and made the teeth ring in his head, shrill and alien as the—

As the tap of hooves on metal.

Harry turned his head to the side as similar sounds answered the music of the magic. Centaurs were coming out of the trees, each one wearing a steel drum on a strap around his neck. The strap was long enough to let the instrument dangle nearly to the level of his hooves, and so each one would advance a step, then curl up one foreleg and bring it down on the drum's surface, then advance another step. The magic fed from the sounds, and Harry's breath grew short as the power dizzied him.

"What the hell is going on?" Draco whispered.

"The breaking of our web," said Firenze, hearing and answering him. He gestured to the bound and helpless Coran. "We have looked at our web, and we know what the power of a willing sacrifice can do. We wish to alter our nature. When we are no longer a danger to others, then we can be free, and we will harm no one." For a moment, he turned his head, his blue eyes catching Harry's. "The *vates* will no longer hesitate for fear of our committing rape."

"I would fear to set you free when such freedom seems a submission to the wizards who bound you, though," said Harry quietly. "If you change what you are, then will they not have won?"

"We were bound long, long ago," said Firenze in return, even as the centaurs halted and there came an end to the painful drumbeats, though not the piercing, sticking sensation of the magic. "We cannot remember precisely what we were when free. Freedom alone is what remains in our memories, as a dream hungered and hoped for and sent from the stars. We have changed, Harry Potter, *vates*. We know what we are now, and what we are would not wish to rape. We know only that we would, set free. And so long as you fear that would happen, you will not break our net."

Harry had to nod. That much was true. He would not impinge on the free will and safety of others by simply snapping the centaurs' web when he knew the consequences that followed would be his fault.

"So we have chosen," said Firenze. "Legend after legend, across the centuries, bespeaks the power of sacrifice. And one of the legends bespeaks more. There was a centaur named Chiron, it is said—almost alone among the centaurs of Greece, wise and kind, while the others were drunkards and rapists." Harry darted a quick glance at Firenze's face, but it was blank, and his voice as he spoke was calm. "And he was immortal, and a tutor of heroes. But he took a wound at the hands of Heracles, and because he could not die, he suffered from it endlessly. In the end, he sacrificed his immortality and earned peace from his pain—but he used the sacrifice to free Prometheus the bound and suffering, to insure that someone else could continue in painless life."

Firenze slammed a hoof into the earth. "So says that legend. Other legends speak of different motives for Chiron, and even immortality coming to him after death. But we are not immortal, and we choose to take this legend as our inspiration. We are centaurs, we wish to be free, and we have chosen to change ourselves to become like Chiron. Every one of us has freely consented." He turned his head again, and his eyes were fiercer and brighter than Harry had ever seen them. "That consent is part of the sacrifice, that we give up part of what we were to transform ourselves into something new. And the other part of it is a willing death, and a willing hand to take that life." He was staring at Harry without blinking now.

Harry swallowed. "You want me to kill Coran," he said, not making it a question.

"You *can't* do that," said Draco angrily, from behind his shoulder. "You can't make him do that."

"No," said Firenze. "No one can make a *vates* do anything, or he becomes less than a *vates*. We can but ask."

Harry studied the centaur's face, aware of Draco taking furious breaths behind him, and his own emotions, a boiling mixture. He wondered how long it had taken the centaurs to decide this, and Coran to come to the notion of sacrificing his life. He had no doubt they were telling the truth, though. If they were not, then the magic would fail. Something like this had to be willing. Acies was perfectly right. Willing sacrifices raised the power of the spell. Conceivably, someone could take Coran's blood against his will and attempt the transformation, but the ritual would be much weaker.

So, now, what they waited on was *his* consent.

Harry looked at Coran. He had not known him very well. He hated the thought of killing. He hated the thought that his hand would take a life even in war, which was the reason he had tried not to fight any of the Death Eaters but Voldemort with lethal force. And perhaps if he had never killed at all, he would have found this impossible.

As it was, he had no innocence to lose. And he knew what murder looked like. Murder had stared at him with bulging eyes as shards of silver sliced his throat open, and broken apart in a rain of ashes over the lake.

This was not murder. This was a task that they were asking him to fulfill.

Acies's words about respecting sacrifice rang in his head, and Harry nodded. "Tell me what I must do," he said, bringing his eyes back to Firenze's.

Draco grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "Harry," he whispered. "You can't. It'll destroy you." His face was pale and strained. "I ought to stun you and drag you back to Hogwarts."

"Draco, you wouldn't get out of here alive if you did that," said Harry, knowing he spoke the truth. The centaurs had been ready to hang Draco in first year to test Harry. They would not kill out of malice, but they would bring about the death of anyone who interfered in this ritual, because it was too sacred to be disturbed. "And I want to do it."

"*Why*, Harry, for Merlin's sake?"

Harry found himself smiling. He thought it must be an odd smile, from the way Draco stared at him. He didn't care. "Because I respect them," he said. "And I honor them, and I can only imagine the honor they're doing me, the only wizard they felt able to call on for help." He gentled his voice when he saw the frantic concern in Draco's eyes. For the first time in a week, the lingering remnants of anger had come down from between them, and Harry knew that Draco was purely worried for him. It felt, sneakily, wonderful. "I promise that I'll be all right, Draco. I wouldn't do this if I thought it could destroy me."

"You tend to overestimate what you think you can bear, Harry." Draco's hand settled on his shoulder again. "Please, don't do

this.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “That’s true, Draco, but in this case, they’re also making sacrifices, ones that are dependent on and entwined with the ones that I make. I won’t fail them.”

Draco clenched his wand, and Harry could see the notion of interfering flicker across his face. Then he looked around at the centaurs, and closed his eyes and gave a little grimace.

“Promise me that you’ll pull out of there if you think you’re faltering,” he whispered.

“I would have to,” said Harry, and reached up to kiss his forehead. “I wouldn’t have a choice. That would just waste Coran’s life and their commitment.”

Draco nodded, but turned his head aside as Harry walked towards the stones, as if he couldn’t watch. Harry understood that. He knelt down in front of Coran, facing him, according to Firenze’s soft instructions.

Coran looked back at him. He was not quite calm, the white of his eyes standing out like a horse’s, but he had an expression of fierce determination on his face. Harry felt near helpless with admiration.

“Here is the blade.”

Firenze gave Harry a knife. Harry moved it through a patch of moonlight, and blinked as it seemed to disappear. Then it reappeared again when he held it towards Coran, a thin edge of blue-silver. Made of light, he thought. Could a blade made of light hurt someone?

Then he thought of sunshine focused through a prism, and how it could burn, and nodded. *It can if it’s intense enough.*

“First you must cut a lock of his hair,” said Firenze. “It was a custom of mourning, to cut the hair. It says farewell to the past, and what we have been. Cut by your hand, taken from his head, symbolizing our decision, it binds all three of the sacrifices undertaken this day.” He was chanting the words by the end, and when he stopped, the tapping of the hooves on the metal drums began again.

Harry nodded, then reached up, bracing his stump against Coran’s forehead, to cut the nearest dark lock. The knife severed it almost before he knew what was happening, and it fell into the heel of his hand as he tilted it hastily to catch the slight weight.

It should have been slight weight, at least. Harry gasped. The lock felt like a stone instead, weighing his hand down, moving it towards the center of the world. He knelt again, and felt the air thicken, the magic dancing around him like a wind, like a storm. The only sensation he could compare it to was that of a prophecy coming true.

“The hair is taken,” Firenze intoned. “It must be placed into the mouth of the sacrifice.”

Harry stood up. Coran had his mouth open. Harry gently placed the piece of hair between his teeth, and Coran closed his lips and held on.

“We do this in memory of Chiron,” Firenze chanted. “And as he was a healer in life, he dealt with blood, and he bled before he could die. Take the blood of the sacrifice from the right shoulder, where we believe Chiron was wounded.”

Harry took a deep breath, and then turned and sliced the knife across Coran’s shoulder. He winced at the first sight of the blood, but forced himself to glance at Firenze, who had trotted forward to stand beside him. Firenze’s gaze was ancient, cold, emotionless as the stars themselves, looking from above.

“Smear your hand with the blood,” he told Harry, “and anoint his throat.”

Harry obeyed, curling his fingers awkwardly to keep from dropping the knife. The blood felt odd, warmer on his hand than it should have. He found Coran looking at him as he smeared it into place, and he stared back, wondering all the while what kind of life the young centaur had had. What had made him decide to do this? Love for what his people could be? Desire for freedom? Because he could do nothing else?

Harry was never going to know, and that increased his awe and his sorrow, so that they bled into and fed off each other, and

increased his determination to do this right.

The magic closed in with a roll when Harry finished smearing all the blood. Now all Harry could see was himself, Coran, the device of stones and rope that bound Coran, and Firenze.

“We do this in memory of Chiron,” Firenze repeated. “And now the hair is placed in the sacrifice’s mouth, and the blood is smeared upon the sacrifice’s throat. Coran, whose very name resembles Chiron’s, has given his life. We have given our will.” The pressure of the magic grew so tight that Harry could hardly breathe. “And the *vates* gives his consent.”

“I do,” said Harry, unsure if he should speak, but finding the words pulled from him.

“Then cut the sacrifice’s throat,” Firenze whispered. “Follow the path of the blood.”

Harry shivered, and stood to his full height. Even with Coran kneeling, it still wasn’t easy to reach his throat. Harry wished he was taller, and then felt an odd spasm of amusement. This was certainly the strangest reason he would ever have to wish that he had grown already, he thought.

He let his breath rush in and out of his lungs, and listened to Coran’s breathing, and recalled Acies’s words. *As we move through the world, caught up in what we have given and will give, we forget that others have made sacrifices similar to ours, sometimes larger, sometimes more willing.*

Coran’s sacrifice was willing. Harry had to trust that, and to think that there was no reason he would try to trick Harry, and the same thing with the centaurs’ giving their consent to this.

Wonder made him squeeze his eyes shut. When all that had been given, dare he falter now and refuse to do his part, or claim that he could find a better way of doing things? He had to recognize his limitations sometimes, had to yield his judgment to the will of others sometimes.

He reached up, and Coran tilted back his head, showing the path of the blood clearly in the strange, intense, limited light they were enclosed within. Luckily, the path of the smear included his jugular vein.

Harry took a last deep breath, feeling as if he were drawing it for both of them, and then sliced along the path.

Blood rushed forward.

The life flickered once in Coran’s blackberry eyes, but the intensity never ended until he did. Then his head dropped forward, holding the sliced throat.

Silence rushed over them.

Harry found himself utterly alone. Darkness was above him, and darkness below, and clouds pressed in on his ears and his chest and his heart. The knife had slipped from his fingers; he did not know where it had gone. Above him, when he tilted his head back, he saw the stars gleaming, in the image of a centaur with something in his arms.

Centaurus, he thought, distantly. *The constellation Chiron was made into.*

The darkness and silence broke apart, and noise and light returned with a crash.

Harry cried out as he felt the magic snap past him like a newly released flood. Part of it *came* from him, he thought, fueled by his will, and another part from the body of Coran hanging by its ropes, and another part from the centaurs grouped in the clearing. It slammed together, and leaped and cut through itself like foaming waves, and then it turned and dug into the centaurs.

Harry could feel the emotion propelling the rush: stern and unrelenting joy. He drew in breath that was hurried and frenzied, both because he could not take in enough of air that had joy, and not wind, as its supreme element, and because the magic continued to draw ruthlessly from him. He had promised to this, committed to this, and so had Coran, and so had the centaurs.

Made threefold, given three times over, this was not a flow of will that could be stopped or turned aside.

Harry felt the moment when the centaurs changed, when the magic performed the transformation they had committed to, took

away the wild brutality that made them rape, and made them wise and gentle. It was a wrenching sideways snap, out of a world that had been and into a new one. It was a birth. It was an awakening, and a rising of a phoenix on fire-born wings. The centaurs cried out, and their voices changed as they did so.

The power pierced Harry again, and pulled more and more magic from him like blood. For the first time, he felt it working completely independently of him, to undo the web that bound the centaurs. He had promised, and meant the promise, and that was all he had had to do. The centaurs had promised, and meant the promise, and they were changed. Now the magic glimmered, tracing out the threads of the web in white fire, and then sinking into and burning them from the outside, raising inner flames that made them implode at the same time. Harry felt that stern joy dismiss the strands of the web as something ugly, unneeded, and unable to stand against the power that it could summon.

And then it was over, too abruptly. Harry felt as if he were in freefall for a moment, until he landed. He found himself panting, kneeling again, back in his human body, and the light was gone. He swallowed to keep from crying out at the loss.

He lifted his head to find the clearing transformed. The walls were roots and dirt now, and looked the better for it. The grass was as brown as it should be with the approach of autumn, and covered with dead leaves.

Coran's body hung on the stones, and glimmered, the last remnants of the joy withdrawing into him. He looked nothing more, and nothing less, than dead.

Firenze's hoofbeats recalled Harry's attention to him. The centaur had a smile on his face, a true smile, the first time Harry could remember seeing one. He scooped Harry gently up in his arms and set him on his back.

"We are more of this world now," he said, "more of the earth than the stars, though they shall always speak to us. Come, *vates*. Let us get you home." Harry looked around for Draco, and saw another centaur kneeling to collect him. He nodded, and clung to Firenze's mane, and closed his eyes.

Awe was still shaking him, a continuation of that humility that had snatched him out of himself in Defense, but deeper, darker, more radiant, more sacred. Harry found himself keenly alive to the centaurs around them, wondering what they were thinking. Did they miss what they had been? Or would they, once the shock and thrill of the newness wore off?

It was good of Firenze and his fellow to let Harry and Draco ride them back, a generous gift, a sign of pride and honor. Harry felt part of his awe turn into gratitude.

What was Draco thinking? Harry found that he could not wait to know. He would ask once they got back to Hogwarts, and give what assurances were needed. Perhaps he would do the same thing with other people, if they had questions. Would Millicent still want to be his delegate to the centaurs? Perhaps they would not need one. What was Pansy thinking about this? Would McGonagall be relieved to know that she no longer had to worry about the centaurs attacking people who went into the Forest?

What was Snape thinking?

Harry blinked, and licked his lips, and opened his eyes to see the edge of the Forest looming closer.

He did not feel like someone who had just killed, whose parents were on trial for child abuse, who had felt betrayed by his guardian only that morning. He was exalted, at peace, lifted into the heights and wrapped in comforting darkness.

He had been reminded that there was a world outside himself again, one he could take a vital and active interest in, and that one mistake did not mean the end of everything.

On anyone's part. No one's mistake means the end of everything. We can inflict deep wounds, but the wounds can heal.

Harry nodded, a small, decisive movement of his head against Firenze's neck, and closed his eyes. The resolve he made then had worry behind it, of course, but also its own stern, deep joy.

I'll talk to Snape tomorrow. It is time I respected his sacrifice.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-One: Forgiveness and Mercy

Harry suspected that Snape wouldn't want him to wait for the morning, although Draco, walking behind him, uttered a little groan of disappointment when they passed the door to the Slytherin common room.

Harry glanced at him over his shoulder. "Are you sure that you don't want to stay behind?"

"Not if you're going where I think you're going." Draco squared his shoulders, as if he thought that would somehow diminish his weariness. "You'll probably come out of this fight just as tired as I am, and I'll need to carry you back to Slytherin." For a moment, his face brightened. "I'd enjoy that."

"I don't know," said Harry thoughtfully. "I've seen sense. Perhaps Snape will manage to see some."

"Sometimes, you're no fun," said Draco.

Harry frowned at him, but Draco refused to explain what he meant. Harry shrugged. "Just don't interfere in the fight, please, Draco," he said. "Snape and I need to—" He paused, then waved a hand vaguely before him, hoping that it would stand in for the words he didn't know how to pronounce. "Really fight," he said. "Really talk. Smash the barriers. If we don't, then I can't expect him to understand what I felt out in the Forest tonight."

"I still don't understand how whatever you felt in the Forest encouraged you to forgive Professor Snape," Draco muttered as they turned the final corner and came to a halt before the door of Snape's office. Harry hadn't been here in months, and, for a moment, the knowledge dizzied him. He'd spent the summer away from Snape and Hogwarts before, but then he'd been back inside this office a day after returning to school. He shook his head and knocked.

"If I can understand what drove a sacrifice like Coran's, then I can understand what drove a sacrifice like Snape's," said Harry. "That doesn't mean I'm suddenly going to fall into his arms sobbing, but—"

"Mr. Potter. Mr. Malfoy."

And there was Snape, and suddenly this was harder than Harry had known it would be. He took a deep breath and faced his guardian. "Hello, sir," he said quietly. He didn't know which emotion would come out in his voice, but it turned out to be a mild one—regret, or possibly melancholy. "I have something to say to you, and Draco wants to witness it. Can we come in?"

Snape stared at him. Harry *knew* the emotion in his eyes: hope. And why not? This was the first time that Harry had treated him with less than severe coldness since his parents' arrest.

"Come in," said Snape, almost as if he were repeating Harry's words rather than issuing an invitation. He moved aside and gestured for Harry to take a seat on one of the chairs. Harry walked into the office, but remained standing. He didn't want Snape to think they weren't on equal footing, and Snape already had a height advantage.

"Sir," he murmured, "I want to tell you that I understand, a bit better now, what you were giving up in sending the information about my parents and Dumbledore to the Ministry. You thought I would hate you, didn't you? You expected that you'd forfeited the right to be my guardian, any trace of a bond beyond teacher and student."

Snape's eyes were large and dark in his pale face. Harry wondered how much sleep he'd been getting. It was a question he would have been unable to picture himself giving a damn about this morning, unless he were considering Snape and other sleep-deprived victims together.

"I did think that, Harry," said Snape. "But I kept hoping that you would forgive me, and I would not have sacrificed so much after all." He clenched his teeth down as if he would prevent himself from saying the next words, but they crept out anyway. "Are you forgiving me? Is this what that is?"

Harry flinched a bit. The commitment that had carried him out of the Forest, the remembrance of Snape's sacrifices, was currently battling with the remembrance of the churning hostility that Snape's announcement of the crimes had released. Many people seemed to believe that Dumbledore could not be guilty, or else that it should have been handled privately. Perhaps they were right? Harry knew that he would have preferred it that way, at least.

“I’m not as angry as I was,” he said, choosing the most sincere response. “That doesn’t mean I’m not still angry.”

Snape nodded, as if unsurprised. His eyes were drawing in the sight of Harry’s face, soaking it in. Harry felt another tremor overtake him. He had not realized how much Snape had *missed* him.

That’s what he was trying to say in McGonagall’s office. He really did miss you. It wasn’t a plot to pull an emotional reaction from you after all.

Harry rubbed his eyes. The wonder and awe he had felt—he had to keep his mind focused on that. He’d come here intending to tell Snape the whole truth, about how things had to fall out between them now. He couldn’t just suffer shock after shock and stare open-mouthed. Perhaps this would be a bit harder than he’d assumed, with more obscure emotions swirling around in his mind like dragonweed in clean water and destroying his distance from the situation, but he had to keep pushing forward.

“I—” said Harry, and then shook his head. “I was tempted to forgive you even before this.” He felt Draco shift behind him, as if about to speak, but luckily he kept his mouth shut. “But I didn’t know how to tell you what I thought our new standing should be. I don’t need a guardian any more.”

Snape’s eyes grew piercing. “Then that is an enduring disagreement,” he said.

Harry sighed. “Why would you want to act as a guardian to me, sir?” he asked. “I haven’t been a very good ward.”

“All that I have done, I have done for love of you.” Harry blinked. That Snape had managed to say the word with both him and Draco there was astounding. “And I have been a guardian,” Snape continued steadily. “My role where you are concerned is defending and protecting you, Harry. And I have put you into some danger that I did not intend with my actions, given how many people seem willing to defend their precious Light Lord.” Snape gave that familiar sneer. “I am *surprised* that there are so many fools in the wizarding world. I do not know why. My life should have taught me not to be an optimist.”

He took one of the chairs, which left his eyes more on a level with Harry’s. “I can at least protect you from the dangers of my own making, and I wish to protect you from others as well.”

“I don’t have a good track record with parents,” said Harry, deciding he might as well lay this out in the open. “I don’t believe that you would ever abuse me the way Lily has, Professor, or look aside from abuse the way James did; you’ve already proven that. But you’ve also proven that you wouldn’t hesitate to hurt other people, even though I’ve asked you not to, in the name of keeping me safe.” He glanced at Draco over his shoulder as he said that.

“I am sorry for the compulsion I placed on you,” Snape said, addressing Draco. “And Harry, I am sorry for lying to you about it. I am not sorry, and will not be, for what I have done to your parents and Dumbledore.”

I didn’t expect him to be sorry for it. I didn’t. Harry told himself that until he believed it. He held Snape’s gaze. “But you understand why I don’t want you to be my guardian again, sir,” he said. “You must. Your definition of the best way to handle my protection and mine do not match up.”

“Of course they don’t,” said Snape. “I imagine that most guardians do not think the same way as the children they protect.”

Harry swallowed. He couldn’t object that he wasn’t a child, or Snape was likely to retort that saying that proved that he was acting childish, and required someone to defend him. “Sir, I’d want to be involved in any future decisions that you make about my protection,” he said. “And I don’t know if you would allow me that.”

“It would depend.” Snape seemed to have recovered his balance already, which irritated Harry. He’d come in so determined, so poised on the wings of his revelation in the Forest. Why couldn’t he have retained that exalted distance? Instead, he was crawling in the midst of his emotions again. “If I thought that you could understand and react to the situation rationally, I would certainly consult you. I did not this time because I thought you would insist on leaving your parents and Dumbledore free. If a situation like that arises in the future, no, I would not delay saving you because you might not like it.” Snape folded his hands. “I am sorry for the consequences of my decision that have had a negative impact on you, Harry. I am not sorry for making it in the first place. What else would you have suggested I do?”

The question was mild, not biting, and Harry seized the chance to talk about it. Perhaps he *could* convince Snape and bring him around to his side after all. “Handle it privately,” he said firmly. “Even with a sudden confrontation. There are things I could have done to confine Dumbledore’s magic for a short time, and of course my parents would have been no trouble to handle. Bind them

and hold them in a room with us, and I think we could have forced them into acknowledging that what they have done is wrong.”

Snape gave a single, sharp cluck of his tongue. “And yet, I heard from the Minister that an attempt to talk to your father resulted in him blaming you for the situation, Harry?”

“He was upset,” said Harry evenly. “He didn’t know what he was saying. And of course, once the abuse charges were filed, it was probably too late. If we could have done it beforehand—“

“Look me in the eye,” said Snape, leaning forward. “You know it is very hard to lie to a Legilimens like that, Harry. Look me in the eye and tell me that you believe your parents and Dumbledore would have changed their minds if you could speak to them privately.”

Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if I’m a bit uncertain,” he said. “I still think it would have been a better method than this.”

“Why, if all it did was warn them and not convince them anyway?” Snape was at his calmest. Harry could feel himself edging towards an explosion. He took the anger, crushed it into a small ball, and dropped into one of the Occlumency pools. Some of it leaked back, though, and so Harry counted to ten under his breath before he responded.

“I still think it would have been the best course,” he said. “No need to get the Ministry involved, to have dozens of people upset at the loss of their leader. And we would still have Dumbledore on our side to fight against Voldemort.”

“I believe he would have manipulated you rather than fight the Dark Lord,” said Snape quietly. “He fears you more than him.”

Harry blinked, once, then twice. That hadn’t occurred to him. *Of course, Snape is an idiot about things like this sometimes. He’s probably exaggerating, and waiting to see if I notice.* “Come off it.”

Snape’s eyebrows rose, and an expression that was neither smile nor scowl curved his mouth. “I am not lying, Mr. Potter, nor even stretching the truth. Albus Dumbledore does fear you. Nothing—not a confrontation, not reasoning, not a promise or an Unbreakable Vow—would have stopped his attempts to gain control of you. Nothing will but his death or the loss of his magic. Either of those is a probable outcome of the trial. I will be satisfied with either.”

Harry went briefly cold inside. He had forgotten that while his revelation in the Forest might have taught him respect and wonder and awe for other souls, Snape hadn’t thought the same thing.

“You made the charges child abuse for that reason, didn’t you?” he asked, voice breaking.

“I made them because that is *what they did*,” said Snape, his voice snapping like an ice floe. “But yes, I knew that execution was a probable consequence of those particular accusations.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re still a person,” he said. “I’m trying to understand why you did what you did because denying you forgiveness when you acted out of your personal convictions is silly. And my parents and Dumbledore are still people. I’m not going to try to free them or stop the trial, but—it’s just—execution is too extreme a punishment for anything.”

He tilted his head back, eyes on Snape’s face. “There are people who would have wanted you dead for being a Death Eater,” he said quietly. “You didn’t deserve it. How can you say that someone else deserves death?”

“Because I feel they do.” Snape did not turn a hair. “And I am not the one who does the judging from this point forward, Harry. The Wizengamot will. You have not listened to what I said. I did not bring these charges against your parents and the Headmaster to murder them. If I only cared about their deaths, then I would have killed them myself. I merely knew this could happen, and didn’t flinch from it. That is the difference. It is important to me that they be punished. What form the punishment takes is less important.”

“It is important to me,” said Harry. “I want to stop the Wizengamot from executing anyone. Life in Tullianum, loss of their magic—“ He flinched at the thought of his father’s face looking like his mother’s in the moments after the justice ritual had taken her power, but pushed ahead. “Those would be things I could live with. But not their deaths.”

Snape nodded. “I understand.”

“But you aren’t willing to do anything to change it,” said Harry, turning his gaze away.

“Plead for them to live? Drop the charges? Not testify against them?” Snape’s voice was becoming sharper and sharper. “No, I am not.”

Harry closed his eyes and stood in silence, reminding himself to breathe, striving to recapture the sense of calm clarity he’d had in the Forest. He needed to respect Snape’s decision, Snape’s sacrifice. Snape had made this decision knowing what it would cost him, and that he and Harry would clash over it, possibly forever. The conviction that must have driven him forward in the face of that was immense.

He did it out of love. Surely you can appreciate that?

I could appreciate it better if not for its being me, Harry thought, and felt a brief flash of amusement. Here we go again. What he did would have been admirable if he were rescuing Draco or Neville or anyone else. But that love of me might cause someone else to die—it’s very hard to accept.

“I am glad to be in the same room with the sensation that you don’t hate me,” Snape said, breaking into Harry’s reverie. “Regardless of what you may have thought, Harry, I was not trying to provoke or hurt you with my comments during the first week of school. Merely unwilling to let you withdraw into a cold shell and pretend that I didn’t exist.”

Harry nodded. “I know that now.”

Silence returned. Harry could see Draco looking back and forth between them, obviously trying to read their faces and uneasy about what would happen next. *He probably has the right to be, Harry thought. I don’t know myself.* The fury he’d felt towards Snape was gone, slid and dissolved into a roiling mass of other emotions, but of those emotions—understanding, pity, love, anger, regret, the wish that things could be different—none was dominant enough to tell him how to react towards Snape.

“Perhaps you could tell me what you are willing to accept from me, Harry,” Snape said. “I have said that I will not stop defending you. I will not. But I will attempt to consult with you before I make any move so drastic again. I held off on filing the charges for a long period of time, because I wished to do so only when I thought you were being abused and would not defend yourself. Hopefully, that situation will never arise.”

Harry hesitated. Then he said, “I suppose I should—I could use your help with Occlumency and Legilimency. I tried to take on the Dark Lord in his mind the other night. He slipped past my defenses and came into my mind instead, and some of my emotional control was abraded by what looked like a snake in his thoughts.”

Snape hissed. “That link between the two of you is dangerous,” he said. “It should be shut. I believe that you possess the Occlumency to do so, Harry.”

Harry stiffened his shoulders. Here was another thing they were going to disagree about, then. “I can’t,” he said. “The visions are useful in strategy for the war. Thanks to them, we know that he’s planning an attack for the autumnal equinox. If I shut the link, then we won’t have any idea of what he’s doing.”

Snape closed his eyes. “I cannot force you to do this,” he murmured.

“So glad you realize that.” Harry’s anger slipped out again, but he swallowed it, and went on. “There are things I don’t understand about my own mind anymore, since I had to strip down and rebuild it so thoroughly. I would appreciate your help with that end of things.”

Snape nodded once. “I was not there to help you with that madness,” he said. “At least I can make sure that you do not suffer from it.”

Harry fought down the urge to say that he wouldn’t have had to rebuild at all if not for Snape’s insistence on exposing his past to the world. “I’d also like access to some of your potions ingredients when I need to brew more Wolfsbane,” he said. “I don’t have much money left in my personal vault now, and ordering the ingredients from the apothecary would probably get the price raised, thanks to my—notoriety. Would you be willing to permit me to do that?”

“Harry!” Draco exclaimed before Snape could respond. “Why didn’t you tell me that you needed money? You’re more than welcome to anything the Malfoys have, you *know* that.”

Harry could feel his face heating up. “I’m not poor, Draco,” he said. “I don’t need charity. Potions ingredients would serve me better than money.” He looked up into Snape’s face. “And I’m willing to perform chores around the lab or help him with potions, whatever he needs, in order to make up for the ingredients.”

“Harry.” Snape’s voice was soft. Harry wished it wasn’t so soft. He had to close his eyes and turn his face away. “I consider you welcome to all the contents of my potions lab, as well.”

“But the ingredients for Wolfsbane are hard to replace,” Harry argued. “I’d feel better if you let me make up for them somehow.”

Snape sighed. “And if I asked you to be honest with me, and speak with me about your reaction to the trial and the charges? That is what I would want from you, Harry. I will not ask that you forgive or understand everything I have done, not immediately. But since I have unleashed these consequences, the very least I want to do is help you through the suffering of them.”

Harry swallowed. He could fool Madam Shiverwood, who didn’t know him very well. He knew he couldn’t fool Snape. If Snape asked him the right questions, he would uncover things like Harry’s carefully hidden weariness with all the volatile emotions and blame around him. It would be making himself vulnerable, and speeding up the reconciliation process that Harry wanted to take slowly.

“You need not,” said Snape. “You need not, Harry. I only asked to see if you were willing. You are still welcome in my lab and my office without that.”

Harry felt the most ridiculous urge to cry. That passed, luckily, but then came the more familiar urge to curl up and hide. He didn’t *want* Snape to make offers like that. It moved them into a land beyond debt and obligation and sacrifice, and all the epiphanies that Harry might have in Defense Against the Dark Arts in the course of a year would not be enough to handle it. He was used to loving other people like this, without expectation of return. To know that he was loved like that...

It made him feel vulnerable and prickly all over. He could deal with it as long as it wasn’t actually pushed into his face, but now it had been.

Draco’s arms slid around him, and that intensified the vulnerable feeling. Harry took a deep breath and managed to stand free of the embrace and meet Snape’s eyes, troubled though he was that they might look right through him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Snape sighed. “Harry, have you spoken to anyone but Madam Shiverwood about this?” He didn’t identify *this*, but Harry knew what it meant well enough.

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t want to,” he added defiantly when Snape opened his mouth. “There’s enough happening that I don’t think I have to. Rebuilding my mind let me accept that, yes, it was abuse, and yes, what they did to me was wrong. And now I’m reconciling with you, and that will also be a help. But most of the time, talking about it just makes me tired. And as long as I’ve accepted that it was abuse and it was wrong, then what—“

“So much else, Harry.” Snape leaned back in his chair and kept his gaze steady. “I already know about most of it, thanks to my training you in Legilimency and having Dumbledore’s memories of your training. If you do decide to confide in me, I will at least not have to ask you many questions.”

Harry nodded. “Madam Shiverwood knows all about it, too,” he said. “She’s seen the Pensieve, and read the scrolls.”

“That’s good.” Snape looked resigned. *He knows that he can’t really push, Harry thought. He knows that we aren’t reconciled all the way yet, and he doesn’t have the right to say these things to me.* “Please, Harry,” he murmured. “When you are ready to speak, then let me know.”

Harry caught a frightening glimpse, then, of how much further he might have to change himself—*private* things about himself. He’d accepted that he’d need to change his stance in relation to others, especially the more he thought about how he hadn’t recognized or respected their sacrifices enough. And specific behaviors, like not running off and endangering other people, were candidates for change, too. But altering the way he thought about specific memories...

Snape still wants to change the way I think.

Harry caught the fear before it could run away from him. *He always did. You know that. You know that he's wished you thought differently about the abuse since last year. There's no reason to get upset about it now.*

"If I ever change my mind, then I'll let you know, sir," he said, raising his eyes to Snape's and emphasizing his words carefully. "In the meantime, it'll be enough to spend some time brewing Wolfsbane with you, I think. Unless there is something else you would like in return?" he added hopefully.

"No, Harry."

Snape was a Legilimens, good enough to read someone's thoughts with a look into their eyes—and Harry was returning his gaze directly now. He most likely knew exactly what Harry was feeling, and yet he refused to make him more comfortable. He wouldn't let Harry retreat into a bond based on debts and sacrifices.

Perhaps, someday, I can even be grateful for that.

"All right, sir," he said, and walked towards the door. He paused to give Snape a fleeting smile. "I know that we haven't talked everything out, but I think I've said everything I'm ready to say. I understand what you did. I'm not as angry as I was. I just can't quite accept it, yet."

Snape's glance was steady. "That is more than I ever hoped for, Harry," he said.

Harry lowered his head and slipped out of the office. Draco followed close on his heels, and spoke once they were most of the way back to the Slytherin common room.

"Harry," he murmured, and then reached out, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and tugging him to a stop. Harry turned around, and found himself engulfed in an embrace.

"Some of us *do* love you without any need for something in return," Draco murmured into his ear. "I'll wait until you can acknowledge that. I'll be patient. But I thought you ought to know."

Harry struggled against the urge to pull away. Some of this was a sacrifice on Draco's part, too; he'd put up with so much while waiting for Harry to struggle through abuse and forced love for his brother and other obstacles in the way. "Thank you," he said, voice strangled.

Draco sighed, just a little puff of air against his neck, but it was enough to spark a fiery chain of thought in Harry's head.

Perhaps Snape is right. Perhaps there are things I need to change, still, within myself. Harry felt an enormous weariness at the thought, the same weariness he got after he spoke with Madam Shiverwood, but he had dragged himself through worse than this. It won't be as bad as the rebuilding. And I'd much rather do this by myself than in front of anyone else. If I can cure it on my own, then no one else will have a reason to worry about me.

It would mean considering memories he'd never wanted to reconsider, tearing open wounds he'd wanted to leave closed, forcing himself through grief and worry and pain. But the only alternative appeared to be *sharing* that grief and worry and pain. Harry hated the very thought. He'd do this, and perhaps, in the end, he really would be the better for it, healed of some of the effects of the abuse that were probably still influencing him in subtle ways.

Free, and able to respond to what Draco and Snape and other people do for me with a lighter heart.

"*Flagello!*"

Harry recognized the spell the moment it was spoken. It was one he'd used to train himself when he was a child. He rolled, depending on instincts drilled into him over years, and managed to get both Draco and himself out of range of the blue pain curse as it sped down the corridor and clashed in a spate of sparks against the wall.

Harry turned, already knowing the curse had come from behind them and further up the tunnel. A girl's shape moved into view, hissing in rage, and Harry recognized Margaret Parsons, from Ravenclaw. He narrowed his eyes before he could stop himself, and tried to soothe his own anger. She must dislike him very much to have come into Slytherin territory by herself.

“Parsons,” he said. “What was that?”

“I’m *sick* and *tired* of everyone pretending that they’re too scared of you to strike back,” said Margaret. Her hand shook as she pointed her wand at him, but Harry knew it was anger and not fear that made it tremble. “You can be taken down. You’re only human, just a wizard. So what if you have Lord-level power? The weak can strike back at the strong. You showed that when you took down Headmaster Dumbledore.” And now the loathing in her voice was violently painted all across her face. Harry winced at the way it distorted her features.

“Don’t you read the newspapers, Parsons?” Draco was scrambling back into the fight, of course, so mad he actually was spitting as he talked. “Don’t you *realize* what your precious Headmaster did, and ordered done, to Harry?”

“They’re lies, most of them,” said Margaret. “They have to be. Headmaster Dumbledore would *never* do something like that.” Her wand had steadied now. “Tell your boyfriend to move out of the way, Potter. This is between you and me.”

Harry felt a surge of frustration. He was sure that Draco would go mad in trying to protect him, not taking into account that Margaret was simply an idiot. And his own emotions were so volatile that he didn’t really want to duel. Besides, whatever he did to her would just make more people look at him slant-eyed and whisper when it came out, the way that his reflecting back the hex at her in second year had.

No, wait. Defensive magic might be the best choice. I’m sure that some people will take it as an indication that I’m a coward, but I’d much rather be accused of that than bullying.

“*Defigo repulsu Harry Potter et Draco Malfoy*,” he said quietly, and let her hear him say it, and follow the gestures of his wand. Margaret looked astonished for half a moment, until the spell took effect, and she would feel the tingling in her body. She screamed, a wordless, incoherent sound of rage, and pointed her wand at him again.

“*Flagello!*”

Harry didn’t bother dodging the curse this time. It simply sizzled and went out on the end of her wand. Margaret backed up a step, fear as violent as the anger had been shading her face.

“What in Merlin’s name did you do to me, Potter?” she whispered.

“Used a reflecting spell so that you can’t use any magic on me or Draco,” said Harry calmly. “It just turns the spell back into the wand, as though it had met the countercurse on its way.” He shrugged apologetically as her fear turned back into anger. “It’s not used all that often, since it also prevents the person it’s cast on from doing anything to aid or heal the people the magic is bound against, but I thought it best. And you can look it up, Parsons. It’s not illegal or banned, or even Dark magic. You just can’t reverse it, or get anyone else to reverse it for you.”

“Why?” Margaret’s scowl was inhuman. Harry had to wonder what was making her act this way. Perhaps her parents had just raised her to worship Dumbledore.

“Because I’m too powerful,” said Harry. “And the *Finite Incantatem* cast on the wand would just get reflected, too. Sorry.”

Margaret whispered, “Other people are going to hear about this, Potter,” and stamped back up the hallway. Harry shook his head as he watched her go.

“Snape won’t be in bed yet,” said Draco darkly. “We can report this, and—“

“No.”

“Harry.”

It was Harry’s turn to take Draco by the arm and force him to look into his eyes. “Draco,” he said calmly. “What do you think would happen if people heard about this, from whatever whispers Margaret might make to people who already hate me? I *know* about the emotions twisting around the school right now. It’d start a conflagration, people for me and people against me. I’m not going to divide Hogwarts like that. I don’t think Parsons wants to, either, or she would have attacked me in front of witnesses and forced me to respond in public. If she tells the story to the teachers now, she’ll just look bad. Oh, she can prove it, sure, by showing off the curse on her wand, but she’d get in trouble. This was private revenge.”

“She attacked you, Harry!”

“Us,” Harry corrected, though he suspected the Whip Curse had indeed been aimed at him. “And I’ve handled it, Draco.”

“I don’t like this,” Draco said, his face pale and unhappy.

“Tell me,” said Harry, tilting his head, “what exactly would happen if we got Snape involved now.”

“He’d make sure that Parsons couldn’t hurt you again, and—“ Draco stopped.

“However he had to,” Harry finished grimly. “Yes, I don’t *entirely* trust him to be rational about this. And it would still divide the school. We’re in the middle of a war, and we can’t afford that. At the very least, Slytherin can’t afford to be seen as the instigator.” He let out a soothing breath, though he wasn’t sure who it was intended to soothe, and rubbed Draco’s arm. “It’s only about two months until my parents’ trial.”

“And Dumbledore’s trial is set for March.” Draco leaned forward and stared at him. “Can you survive until then, Harry?”

“I’ll just have to, won’t I?” Harry shrugged, and found his thoughts once again wandering towards a spell. Could a spell be making Margaret and the others act irrational about him?

But then, why would other people, like Draco and Snape, still have compassion for me? And the most irrational behavior does seem to be confined to children from Light pureblood families, and not even all of them, or Zacharias wouldn’t have become my ally. No, this is just a consequence of the frenzy the papers have put everyone in. Hopefully, by the time my parents’ trial is done, they’ll calm down a bit. They can’t have much new to report about this.

Harry shook his head, and returned to the present. “I promise I’ll be careful, Draco,” he said quietly. “I hardly want to die either.” He had a sudden flash of inspiration. “And I’ll tell Remus. I think he’d be the person best qualified to watch out for her. He’s not a teacher, so it wouldn’t disrupt a class for him to scold her, and he’s not a Slytherin.”

Draco nodded, obviously unsatisfied but taking what he could get. Harry rolled his eyes slightly as they took their path back to the Slytherin door, careful not to let Draco see. *Voldemort is hunting me, and the wizarding world eats any tidbit about me as if it were a stoat sandwich. One frustrated Ravenclaw student casting a spell at me just doesn’t matter that much in the scheme of things.*

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Raised in Light

Ignifer winced as her excitement from dueling the latest Vipertooteh finally died down, and allowed her to feel the difference in the air between Peru and Britain. She ran a hand through her hair, tugging her head irritably back, and narrowed her eyes, trying to convince herself she was imagining it.

I am not.

There *was* something different about the air here. Britain always felt colder after being in South America, of course, but this wasn’t that. In Peru, Ignifer had felt her head clear, and she had fallen into her old routine of sharp thoughts and quick movements. Coming back felt like stepping into a room of blankets. She felt something gently, inexorably steering her thoughts.

It was familiar. Ignifer knew she had felt it more than once. But she needed to track the sensation to a specific place, or the nagging familiarity would do her no good. Ignifer despised people who acted on faint and likely false memories, and caused irreparable damage to themselves and everyone around them. She closed her eyes, driving her mind back, whispering the old incantations that made images of flames spring up in her head and go diving into her brain, to locate specific memories. Her father would insist that those spells were only for the children of Light families, but Ignifer had not spontaneously lost the ability to use them when she Declared for Dark, nor even when he cursed her.

She walked through image after image of fire, letting the tongues of flame coil around and shape the sensation of control. Where had she sensed it? What spell did it originate from? How far did it extend? When had she felt before?

That last question was the key. Ignifer stepped out of one of the imagined hearths, and found herself in her bedroom, the neatly furnished one she'd had when she was a witch of eight. She knelt on her carpet, her eyes half-lidded and her breath passing in and out of her lungs at a regular rhythm.

Behind her stood her father, one hand resting on her shoulder and his eyes closed.

Ignifer tensed at the sight of him, but that was all she did. The days were long past when she had been unable to bear even the sight of his portrait without trying to smash it, and her strongest feeling towards him now was the same arrogant scorn he showed towards her. She watched as he bent down towards her ear—no, the ear of his still-obedient, still-young daughter—and whispered something. Ignifer stepped closer, attempting to hear what he was saying.

“Converto intellegentiam de Aurelius Gloryflower! Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia!”

Ignifer watched her younger self shudder, and then open her eyes and stare straight ahead. Her father knelt behind her, and turned her head around. Ignifer watched in silent fascination. This was not a memory she could consciously remember having, and she was not sure why. Surely it wasn't traumatic enough that her mind would have tried to lock it away?

She remembered Aurelius Gloryflower—once the head of that illustrious Light pureblooded line, he'd quarreled with her father over the Muggleborn issue in such stupid ways that even now, when she'd shed most of her family's prejudices, Ignifer couldn't help despising him. She had no idea why her father would have wanted to speak a spell to her containing his name.

“Ignifer,” her father said in the memory.

Her younger self just looked at him.

“What do you feel about Aurelius Gloryflower?” her father asked.

“I don't like him,” said the girl, and then shuddered, her face twisting violently. “I *hate* him,” she whispered.

Her father nodded, and smiled, and rose to his feet. “That is right. You should hate him. He is an enemy of our family.”

Ignifer's eyes widened as she took in her own expression. Had she ever really looked like *that*? She'd had no particular reason to do more than dislike Aurelius Gloryflower. But it seemed that at one point, she'd felt incredible, even passionate, loathing for him.

It's a result of that damned spell. He encouraged me in my hatred somehow. Ignifer opened her own eyes, not the eyes of her imagined self, and rose to her feet, frowning. *That spell influences perception. It must exaggerate emotions, too. One small feeling becomes a much larger one.*

More disturbing than all that, to Ignifer, was the fact that she hadn't remembered this until now. Her father had of course cast spells on her when she was younger, as many pureblood Light families did when preparing their children to endure the trials of the wizarding world, but he'd never seen a reason to hide that he was doing it. Why in the world had she forgotten this one?

Was he ashamed to admit that he needed the help, perhaps? Ignifer paced back and forth in her main room, slapping her wand into one palm. *He liked convincing his family of his philosophy on his own. Maybe he didn't want me to know that he'd been reduced to using mental magic.*

But he hadn't laid a Memory Charm on her, either. If he had, the simple incantations to amplify childhood memories wouldn't have managed to recover this one.

And then there was the feeling hanging in the air around her now. As though someone had cast the spell again, but with much greater reach and range, power and subtlety.

Ignifer narrowed her eyes. *And it hasn't reached Peru,* she thought, her conclusions flying to their targets like arrows. *That's the reason the air in Britain feels differently than the air in Peru.*

She wheeled and made for her owlery, where her owl, Athena, waited. She would send word and warning to her allies. She did not know who the focus of this particular spell was, but it was likely affecting all of them. And if Harry Potter was sincere in his promises of aid to her, then she had to be sincere back.

Potter. Ignifer shook her head. The newspaper stories concerning him filled her with regular doses of rage. She had to put them down and go for long walks each time she finished reading one, or to Peru for one of her duels. The thoughts of what he had endured made her want to draw her wand, go to the Ministry, and attempt to punish his parents and the former Headmaster of Hogwarts for their actions, when they weren't making her coldly satisfied that her decision to withdraw from Light wizards was the right one.

She never had gone to the Ministry—not yet. The irrationality of her emotions frightened her and made her ashamed. She would probably be arrested if she even attempted to harm the so-called helpless prisoners, and of course Potter himself would not be pleased.

She entered the owlery and extended her hand with a little whistle. Athena took off from her perch and landed on Ignifer's arm, nestling against her with an affectionate butt of her head.

Ignifer closed her eyes. She wondered if her mother would firecall her today, as she hadn't yet, but that was a foregone conclusion. Of course she would, and try to pretend that a decade and a half of forced loathing could be cured with Ignifer simply kneeling at her father's feet.

On the other hand, if Ignifer wasn't there to receive the firecall, then her mother might think she was a coward, and Ignifer would not endure insults that were not true. She should be back in her house to open the Floo, not playing with Athena, pleasant as she found the owl's company. She sent her back to her perch with a soft compliment and a treat from one of her robe pockets.

Then she hurried back towards the house, her spine stiff and her boots hitting the ground with clacking sounds. She sucked in a deep breath of clean air to brace herself for the upcoming argument, and then paused.

Didn't I think there was something strange about the air, a moment ago? And have a memory that was connected to the sensation?

Ignifer puzzled about it, then shrugged. Obviously, if the thought had slipped her mind so easily, it was nothing *really* important. She would endure her mother's firecall, and then perhaps she would owl Potter, and see how well he was holding up under the constant onslaught of newspaper articles, the poor boy.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Two: Welcome to the Real World

“...not *sure* he's not a Dark Lord, anyway.”

Harry turned around as he and Draco left the Great Hall, craning his neck to listen to the two chattering Ravenclaw students. He couldn't be sure they were talking about him, no more than the girl who spoke could be sure about the Dark Lord identity. But he was afraid they were.

You're paranoid, he told himself sharply, and faced forward again. *Everybody's not really focusing on you and talking about you. You just think they are. And if someone does mention you, so what? Those damn newspaper articles and your teaching the dueling club are enough to keep their eyes on you.*

Harry was more tired of the articles than he would care to admit. It seemed that every headline in the *Daily Prophet* still referred to him, and they were raking over minor details of his childhood now that Harry couldn't think were of interest to anyone but the Wizengamot members—if them. Skeeter's articles were probably the best of the bunch, since they did do something other than remind people that he had been abused at some point in his life, but Harry wanted all of them to just stop talking about it.

Or maybe you're nervous because there's a week to go until Voldemort's attack on the equinox, and you don't have a better plan than the one you've come up with, yet, he tried to reason with himself.

“It's all right, Harry.”

Harry jumped sideways when a hand settled on his shoulder, and whipped his magic up around him. He winced when he saw the incredulous expression on Draco's face, and shook his head, shoving his power back behind the barriers that he most often used.

“It’s all right, Harry,” Draco repeated, and then laughed a little. “Though I guess it really isn’t, if you flinch like that.” Behind the joking tone in his voice, his eyes were bright with concern, and he watched Harry with an intensity that hadn’t been there a moment before.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “I just feel like everyone’s staring at me, and I wish it would stop.”

“Harry.”

Harry started, this time because he hadn’t expected Headmistress McGonagall sweeping up to him. Her face was flushed and hectic—no surprise, really, since she carried so many burdens on her shoulders now—but she was smiling, too, and Harry felt his curiosity stir.

“What is it, Headmistress?” he asked.

“I’ve managed to divine how to reverse the Transfiguration spells on that little wooden dog you gave me, Harry,” said McGonagall, lowering her voice as a few curious students, heading in to dinner late, passed them. “I’m just about ready to bring him back. Would you like to be up in my office to meet him?”

Harry felt his worry drain away into relief, of more than one kind. Finally, *finally*, Regulus would be free, and Harry would get to meet him, and this was a welcome distraction from the crawling fear that filled his skin. “I would, Headmistress,” he murmured. “And could Draco come, too? Regulus should have some family there to welcome him, and I don’t know if you want to wait until I could owl Narcissa.”

McGonagall pursed her lips and looked at Draco for a long moment. Draco tried to appear ingratiating, but that had never worked on McGonagall when she was only Transfiguration Professor, and it wasn’t working now, either.

“Very well,” she said, and Harry exchanged a grin with Draco. When the Headmistress swept towards her office, they both hurried right behind her.

Harry’s heart beat erratically. Some of it was concern—the Transfiguration could still go wrong, of course, especially since they were dealing with Voldemort’s magic. Some of it was curiosity—what would this man he had known for so long only as a voice in his head look like? And some of it was hope.

Perhaps Regulus can be an ally, someone not affected by the newspaper articles and the temptation to whisper about me. He knows everything already. No need for him to get all excited.

“The re-Transfiguration was easy enough once I started paying attention to the construction of the spells,” McGonagall was saying as Harry and Draco stood in front of her desk. She placed the small wooden dog carved with Regulus’s initials on the floor next to the desk. “The preservation spells weren’t there to keep him from bleeding to death, and I would have seen that sooner if I hadn’t been so convinced they were.” She made a face to show how disgusted with herself she was, then went on. “They were to keep him looking exactly the way he did when You-Know-Who—“ She took a deep breath, bit her lips, and said, “*Voldemort*. When Voldemort Transfigured him.”

Harry, distracted from his visions of Regulus emerging from the dog, jerked his head up and stared at her. “You mean—you mean that he still looks nineteen, then?” Harry assumed that Regulus would be nineteen, at least, or perhaps twenty, given how long he had managed to stay free before the Transfiguration.

McGonagall nodded. “He hasn’t aged,” she said quietly. “It’s one of the reasons that reversing the spells is so difficult.” She closed her eyes and said, “I must have absolute *quiet* for this, boys.”

She pointed her wand at the wooden dog, and Harry guessed that she must have uttered a nonverbal incantation. The dog shuddered, and a blue glow spread around it, a sharp, slicing color of blue that Harry had never seen before. The white outlines of letters, Regulus’s initials, stood out from the dog’s belly. Harry wondered if Regulus would bear them as scars when he returned, and then tried not to think that, lest even distracting thoughts keep McGonagall from doing the best she could.

“*Ciao!*”

Harry jumped at the sound of the Headmistress's voice, cracking down like a whip. Then he looked at her in awe. He had never heard one voice sound so—focused was the only word he could find for it. McGonagall still had her eyes tightly closed. Writhing strands of light were dancing around her, lazily forming pictures. Harry stared for a moment before realizing that the strands were all red and gold, Gryffindor colors, and that a complementary light was coming from the dog, silver and green, the colors of Slytherin.

The silver and green lights wrapped around each other, nudging slender, tapered heads like the heads of serpents together, and then abruptly struck towards McGonagall. She opened her eyes and glared at them, and they collapsed uselessly to the floor, Transfigured into ribbons without so much as a word.

The red and gold light spread down and enveloped the wooden dog, and McGonagall repeated, voice as stern as when she'd encouraged Harry to tell her about his past in second year, "*Cieo. Cieo Regulus Black.*"

The dog was now the center of a maelstrom of light, and Harry saw other dark ropes burn into being and then vanish, seemingly consumed by the Gryffindor-colored radiance. McGonagall was reaching deep, he thought, and her magic sang with finesse, perfectly balanced and perfectly controlled. Harry was impressed. McGonagall might not be as good at Potions as Snape, or as strong as Dumbledore, but she had made Transfiguration her absolute specialty, and Harry highly doubted that either of the two wizards could have challenged her in this branch of magic.

"*Transformo!*" was McGonagall's next incantation, and then she murmured, gently, as if coaxing the toy to yield up the man who had occupied it for so long, "*Catellus ab viro!*"

The toy appeared to turn in on itself. Harry leaned forward, his hand clenching into a fist, and felt a jab of phantom pain from the imaginary left hand that he sometimes seemed to carry on the end of his stump. Draco gripped his arm as if to keep him from going closer. Harry sent him an impatient glance. He knew not to go close. He was just bracing himself not to scream if he felt more pain of the kind with which Regulus had first introduced himself.

But no pain occurred, and the dog, lifting from the floor now and turning somersaults inside the writhing light, didn't scream. Instead, with what sounded like a cough more than anything else, it whirled and became a silhouette, and that silhouette was suddenly much larger than it had been, panting and bowing its head, with four limbs that were definitely arms and legs.

The light faded. McGonagall slumped to the side, catching herself on her desk. The signs of spell exhaustion glimmered on her face. Harry gave her a concerned glance, but couldn't quite convince himself to look away from Regulus for long.

If it *was* him. Quite apart from the afterimages burning in Harry's eyes, there was the fact that this man was kneeling with his head bowed, a long curtain of tangled dark hair falling over his face and concealing it.

"Regulus?" Harry whispered.

The man whipped around, moving quickly, and then halted, staring at him. "Harry?" he whispered. "Merlin, it feels so strange to see you from the outside. It's been more than a year since I have."

Harry didn't respond, because he couldn't. This man was definitely Sirius's brother, and the sight of those familiar Black features, accented and turned slightly different by the fact that they were relatives but not the same person, had stolen his breath. Harry stared into gray eyes larger than Sirius's, a nose slightly longer than his, and, of course, features younger than his had ever been in Harry's conscious memory. Regulus really was a young man of nineteen or twenty, just the way that the Headmistress had said he would be.

"It feels strange having a *body* back, too," Regulus commented, and patted at himself with his hands, small, fluttering motions, as though he were trying and failing to wake himself from a vivid dream.

That made Harry step forward. He might feel hesitant seeing Regulus with a memory, and his voice sounded different from the one in Harry's head, but this was still the man who had shared his head for over a year, who had comforted him and seen his worst memories and offered Harry what help he could and told him when he was being an idiot. Harry hesitantly held out his arms.

Regulus closed his eyes, released a sigh that had more than a little relief in it, and then grabbed Harry around the waist and hauled him close for an embrace. Harry stiffened in surprise for just a moment. Then he decided that, sod it, Regulus needed the hug even if it made him uncomfortable, and let himself relax.

“It’s so good to really meet you at last,” Regulus whispered, finally letting Harry go and sitting back so that he could look at him. He shook his head, and smoothed Harry’s hair away from the lightning bolt scar. “You need a lot more sleep than I thought you did, from the looks of your face.”

Harry was not prepared to listen to silly speeches about dark circles under his eyes or the like, because a polite cough at his shoulder had reminded him that someone else was still in the room, someone who had only heard Regulus’s voice in his head once or twice, during the times he was mentally connected with Harry. He pulled Draco forward. “Regulus, may I present Draco Malfoy, your—well, cousin of some degree, anyway.” He didn’t know the Black family tree well enough to say just how related Regulus and Draco were.

Regulus smiled and held out his hand to Draco, who was obviously drawing on polished pureblood manners as he clasped it. Harry doubted he was actually *prepared* to meet a cousin who had spent a good portion of his life as a wooden dog, and there was probably no pureblood ritual that covered it, either, but Draco did his best, using the greeting that would welcome back an exile. “Greetings, cousin,” he said. “You have long wandered in the spaces between the stars, and we are glad to have you back in the starry spaces with us.”

Regulus grinned. “No need to be that formal, cousin. I feel like I know you, too.” He ruffled Draco’s hair, which made Draco blink and lift one hand as if to make sure it was still there. “You’ve been an enormous help to Harry, and that makes you a friend in my book. Even *better* than a cousin, considering what some of my cousins are,” he added darkly. Harry knew he was thinking of Bellatrix.

He rose to his feet, brushed off his clothes—which had once been Death Eater robes, Harry realized abruptly, though now they were tattered almost beyond recognition—and then turned and bowed to McGonagall.

“Headmistress,” he said softly. “I can never thank you properly for everything you’ve done for me. Please let me know if there is anything I can do. I have already determined to aid you all I can in your war to recover Hogwarts’ respectability. I have few formal duties of my own, other than protecting Harry—“

“What?” Harry asked blankly. *He knows that I don’t need another guardian. At least, I thought he did. And he’s only a few years older than I am, so he’s too young to be a guardian anyway. I think.*

Regulus merrily ignored him. “And I would be interested in seeing that Dumbledore’s new reputation does not damage Hogwarts unnecessarily. The happiest years of my life were spent here.” He grimaced and rubbed his left forearm. Harry found that he could just see the edge of the Dark Mark under Regulus’s sleeve. “I don’t have much political influence just at the moment, but I have the Black fortune, and the Black family estates. Please consider their aid yours.”

McGonagall nodded, a dazed expression coming over her face. Harry waited a moment to be sure that she was not going to speak, then leaned forward. The words about the Black estates had reminded him of something. “Regulus,” he said, and had the small thrill of seeing another face look back at him, rather than just hearing an answer in his own head. He suspected it would take him some time to get used to that. “Now that you’re back in your body, you should raise the wards on Wayhouse, if you can. I don’t know if they’ll listen to you, but I know that Narcissa found Bellatrix there, and if she thinks she can get in any time...”

Regulus closed his eyes. Harry felt a brief ripple of power travel over him, and then *into* him, as if members of the Black family had their own private, personal web. Regulus opened his eyes, grinning. “That’s so much easier and more satisfying when I have a body,” he murmured. “And yes, they listened to me this time, Harry. Right now, the only people who can pass the wards into any of the houses are you, me, and Narcissa.”

Harry nodded, happy that Regulus now trusted Narcissa enough to permit her free access to the Black estates; there was a time not so long ago when he hadn’t. “I should owl my allies,” he murmured, mind jumping to what kind of difference this might make in their plans for Voldemort’s equinox attack. “They’ll want to meet you, and of course, now that you’re back, *we know* that we’ll have some safe places to retreat to.” He paused and eyed Regulus. “If you trust them enough to let them into the houses. I suppose that’s another reason to have you meet them.”

“I can already tell you that I don’t trust all of them,” said Regulus promptly. “But I think it’s a good idea to have a meeting, Harry. Some of them might improve with a closer acquaintance. And Merlin knows, I’d like the opportunity to talk to Lucius and Narcissa again.” His gray eyes gleamed. “And Severus, of course.”

Harry blinked for a moment before he realized Regulus was talking about Snape. “You were both Death Eaters at the same time,”

he said. *That's one bond that they'll share.*

Regulus gave him a searching glance. "And he hasn't told you anything more than that?"

What more is there to tell? But if Snape hadn't mentioned it so far, then it probably wasn't a story that Harry was supposed to ask about. Instead, he just said, "No."

"Then I suppose I'll leave it up to him to tell you," said Regulus. "But we can also talk about guardianship for you, Harry. I don't want to force Severus to give up custody of you. He's been doing too good a job of protecting you. Since he still holds the formal legal guardianship, however, I'll need his permission to make you the Black heir. And—"

"*Wait a moment.*" Harry held up his hand and his stump. Regulus's gaze darted to the stump, and his lips tightened. Harry lowered his left wrist hastily. *If Regulus turns out as overprotective as Snape, then I really will have to scream.* "Who said anything about your making me Black heir?"

"I did," said Regulus. "I distinctly just heard myself say it."

Draco snickered. Harry turned to glare at him. Draco simply grinned back. "I think I like him, Harry," he said. "And there's the solution to your money troubles solved, as well as another place that you could be safe when you aren't in school."

Harry shook his head with a scowl that he meant to take in everyone in the room, possibly including McGonagall, if she also thought this idiocy was a good idea. "Regulus, you can't make me your heir."

"Well, not *yet*," Regulus admitted, finally showing a small sign of doubt in a thoughtful frown. "I told you, there's Snape to agree with me first, and I'll have to convince the Ministry I'm not dead, and that I am who I say I am—though that shouldn't be hard, with the Black wards all responding to me—and then I'll have to sign the papers, and we'll have to do something about the singing creature in Grimmauld Place, so you can visit safely, and—"

"I just—there are blood heirs of the family alive," said Harry. "What about Narcissa? What about Draco?"

"I'll be Malfoy heir, Harry," said Draco, who sounded like he was enjoying all of this enormously. "That's enough for me. I never expected to get the Black estates and monies, anyway, since Cousin Sirius was still alive, even when I thought Cousin Regulus was dead." He said "Cousin Regulus" with a sort of sadistic glee.

"I'm sure Narcissa will agree," said Regulus, with an idle flap of his hand, as if he thought that wouldn't be a problem. "And what Bellatrix thinks doesn't matter anyway. I'll set some money aside for Andromeda and her daughter, of course, but they wouldn't want to live in Grimmauld Place or any of the other houses, anyway, not if I know Andromeda." He smiled at Harry. "So that's all settled."

"Look," said Harry, fighting down the urge to scream. Being around self-satisfied people who insisted on giving him gifts outside the boundaries of a truce-dance or other ritual was *not* his idea of a good time. "What if you want to get married and have children of your own, or if you adopt a magical heir? You're still young, Regulus. You could do it."

"Yes, but right now I don't have anyone in mind," said Regulus. "Stop fighting this, Harry. I made up my mind during all those days I was getting reacquainted with my preserved body and had nothing else to think about. You do best when you have some responsibility that you don't feel you can shirk, and you need a home and a vault that can be absolutely your own." He sneered suddenly, and Harry shivered at the way the expression looked on his face. "I don't think that you'd really want anything your parents deigned to leave you, anyway."

Harry waved his hand, trying to make Regulus understand what he didn't have the words to encompass. "It's too much. I could understand if you wanted to leave me a few artifacts, Regulus, or—" *No, even a place like Wayhouse is too much.* "Or something," he finished lamely. "But not all this."

"And that's your only objection?" Regulus sounded interested, but not really worried, which only irritated Harry all over again.

"Isn't that enough?"

"No, not particularly," said Regulus. "I can still make my will out to whoever I like. People do, you know, even when one child wants to be left out of the inheritance altogether. If I die in the War and it's yours, then you can do whatever you like with it,

Harry. I would never bind you to dispose of it in any particular way, or to keep it if it really bothered you. But I do want a responsible heir, and one I trust and want to honor, and you're it." Regulus grinned at him. "I assure you, the burden's not really so heavy as you make it out to be."

Harry just closed his eyes and shook his head, not really sure what else he could say to refuse the estates and money, and horribly tempted to just give in. At the very least, he wouldn't have to worry about purchasing his school supplies for the rest of the time he was at Hogwarts, or buying ingredients to brew for the Wolfsbane Potion.

And why was he struggling so much against this, anyway?

Maybe it's irrational, but it makes me uncomfortable, he thought, then opened his eyes and looked at Regulus. "I'll owl my allies," he said. "I'm not sure how long it will take them to get here." He hesitated, and looked over at McGonagall, who had recovered from the spell exhaustion and was simply watching them with a distantly amused expression on her face. "And, of course, I need the Headmistress's permission to bring them onto the grounds at all," he murmured.

McGonagall shook her head. "It's all right with me, Harry," she said. "In fact, I should attend the meeting myself, if only to represent Hogwarts."

Harry nodded, and looked back at Regulus. "I am happy that you're here," he said, feeling he needed to emphasize that. "I would be just as glad to let you keep the money and the houses, though."

"I like sharing," said Regulus.

Harry eyed him in resignation, once again hearing Draco snicker behind him. *Just what I needed. Another bloody guardian. And one who maybe knows me even better than Snape does. Joy.*

Harry sat bolt upright in his chair next to McGonagall's desk, aware that he probably looked as if he were going to levitate at any moment, but unable to relax. Most of his allies had answered with unexpected swiftness, and though it was now Saturday, and only two days after he had owled them, he was expecting them for a meeting in the Headmistress's office.

Regulus had spent the day before wandering around the school, talking with Snape about Merlin knew what, and Apparating to the various houses to make sure all the wards were holding. He had also apparently gone to the Ministry. That was the one journey Harry really wished he could have shared, if only to see the expressions on the record-keepers' faces when they realized just who was standing before them.

Harry had spent the day before not relaxing. The lead article on Friday morning had been particularly inflammatory, running under a byline Harry didn't recognize, and strongly hinting that Dumbledore had been right in suspecting that Harry might become a Dark Lord. Harry had seen the stares and the scowls directed his way all morning and all afternoon. It had been enough to put him off his appetite entirely, and he had retreated to the Slytherin common room during the evening.

That was when he had realized that one of the Slytherin seventh-years was gone, and when he asked about her, everyone else averted their gazes.

She went to join Voldemort. Of course, he probably wants as many people with him as possible when he makes his attack on the equinox.

Harry hadn't slept much last night, and not due to visions. The overwhelming weight had crashed down on him, and he'd spent hours drifting in and out of various restless dozes. In his waking periods, he fought against the temptation to creep across the bedroom and wake Draco up, or to go and find Snape, or Remus. He wanted to talk to someone.

About what, though? They know everything already.

That thought had kept him just where he was, and now...now his allies were coming, and he was jumpy.

"It's all right."

Once again, Harry started violently as Draco's hand came down on his shoulder, but he didn't jump out of the chair. He forced

himself to relax as Draco leaned over from the chair next to his and rubbed his back roughly.

“You’ll take them all down, Harry,” Draco whispered. “I know you will. You’ve done harder things than this, and lived through it.”

Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself to lean back into that touch and those murmured words, just for a moment. Then the door to the Headmistress’s office opened, and he slid smoothly down from the chair to resume his feet. It wouldn’t do to be sitting when his allies entered. It was too great a sign of disrespect.

Henrietta Bulstrode, to Harry’s utter surprise, was the first one who entered. She had a faint half-smile on her face, which only deepened when she saw Draco scrambling to mimic Harry.

“Potter,” she said. “Am I to understand that we are finally plotting our first attack in this war, rather than making vague plans about the Black estates and the weapons that might or might not be lying around in them?”

“I mean to answer our enemies’ attack on the equinox, yes,” said Harry, with a quick inclination of his head to the people entering behind Henrietta—Ignifer, Honoria, and Mortimer Belville. “I believed it was time that we formalized our strategy.”

“Such strong words,” said Henrietta softly, taking the chair across from Harry’s. The chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing him, but Harry realized abruptly that, like it or not, he’d set it up so that he was separated from his allies, along with Draco, McGonagall, Snape, and Regulus. Henrietta seemed to notice at the same moment, and her face brightened with amusement. “You really ought to have a gilded throne,” she told him conversationally, “to complete the atmosphere.”

“What a *good* idea,” said Honoria, and waved a hand. Illusions curled around Harry’s chair, turning the wood to apparent gold. Then Honoria frowned, and the gold brightened to diamond. She nodded, pleased, as banners draped the back of the chair—the crests of all the families allied with him, Harry realized with growing horror. Honoria turned a bright, expectant smile on him when she was done, waiting for praise.

Harry realized he had a few choices here. He could drop his head and flush in embarrassment, or he could make the choice that would allow his allies to respect him. He had to worry about impressing more of them than just Henrietta. Mortimer’s eyes, and those of Charles, who had just entered and made his way to the end of the row of chairs, were too sharp, too calculating.

“It still needs a cushion,” he told Honoria. “Could you make one that has Voldemort’s face on it?” Everyone in the room flinched, and Harry lifted his chin, with a small smile and growing confidence. “I rather enjoy the idea of sitting on him.”

Honoria laughed in delight, and waved a hand. Harry glanced over his shoulder, and saw a cushion forming with an exaggerated face on it, more snake than human. It wasn’t at all what Voldemort looked like, but then, he could hardly expect Honoria to know that. It was a good enough approximation.

“Thank you,” he told her earnestly, and then motioned for Edward Burke and Thomas Rhangnara, both hesitating in the doorway, to come in. The Malfoys followed behind them, and then Hawthorn and Adalrico. Adalrico inclined his head when he saw Harry.

“My wife sends her apologies,” he said. “Marian is sick, and she must stay home with her.”

Harry frowned. “The illness isn’t serious, I hope?”

“It is not, thank Merlin,” said Adalrico, and Harry realized he was attempting to keep a grin off his face. “Merely a bit of accidental magic expression that wearied her and made her vulnerable to a cold.” He was darting glances around the room, to see, Harry supposed, who was taking notice that his daughter could perform accidental magic so young. Harry smothered a grin, and then studied the door, knowing that more people had yet to arrive.

He was quietly satisfied when Arabella Zabini stepped into the room and sank into a full-blown curtsy. When she stood up again, the bells in her hair rang softly. Thomas was staring at her in rapt fascination, and he actually started talking before Arabella could get a word in edgewise.

“You’re a Songstress, aren’t you?” he asked. “How long did you train?”

Arabella gave him a cool glance, seemingly torn between pleasure that someone had recognized her and consternation that he had. “Sixteen years, in total,” she said. “And I consider myself still in training. I learn something new every day.”

Thomas clasped his hands together. “What a wonderful philosophy! I consider myself the same way. When I made the decision to Declare for Dark, it was the result of long years of careful consideration. When I—“

Harry cut Thomas off, regretting that his wife wasn't here to curb him. “You're most welcome here, Mrs. Zabini,” he said. “I hope that you can aid us in our endeavors to counter Voldemort.”

“I will most certainly try,” Arabella said, and took a seat on the far end of the row, near Charles. He was staring at her, too. Harry hoped he didn't try Legilimency on her. He didn't want to have to settle disagreements like that among his allies.

Snape, Regulus, and McGonagall arrived in short order. Harry was amused to see Edward Burke lean forward the moment Regulus took his seat on the other side of Harry from Draco and eye him in slowly dawning shock. The shock turned to recognition when Harry placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “Permit me to introduce my newest ally, Regulus Black.”

Surprise, shock, interest, and amusement in various degrees showed up on the faces across from him. Burke was the only one who actually dared to demand—or perhaps the only one rattled enough to demand—“How is this *possible*?”

“The Dark Lord Transfigured me into a wooden dog,” said Regulus, sounding far more pleased with himself than Harry would have thought advisable in the circumstances. “I was bound to my brother's mind for a time, but when the Dark Lord possessed him, he knocked me loose, and I latched onto Harry, as the person in the area most strongly affected by—Voldemort's magic.” He had to take a deep breath before the name, but he said it. “I've been a voice in his head for the past year. Luckily, he finally located my body, and I've been restored to myself by the good offices of Headmistress McGonagall.” He bowed to McGonagall. “And I am heir of the Black estates.”

“I don't believe it.” Burke's voice was quick, rapid. “Prove yourself.”

Regulus grinned at him. “I filed the paperwork at the Ministry yesterday. I'm sure the story will be in the *Prophet* by this evening or tomorrow morning. You can read all about it there.”

“That doesn't prove anything.” Burke glanced around at the other allies, as though looking for support. “Why do you think Potter's trotted this impostor out?” he demanded. “To prove that he has some kind of claim to the Black estates, when everyone knows that by right of descent they should go to me.”

“Not as long as I am alive, Burke,” Narcissa said, in a flat, calm voice. “And after me comes my son.”

“You know very well that if the Ministry officials had listened to reason half a century ago—“ Burke began.

“Be that as it may,” Regulus cut him off, “I'm the eldest son left alive in direct line of descent. And I've made Harry my heir.”

Henrietta narrowed her eyes and gave Harry a look more calculating than ever at that. Honoria giggled and clapped her hands in delight. Most of the others again wore some expression in the middle of surprise.

Burke went mad.

Leaping to his feet, he pointed one trembling finger at Harry. “This is a lie,” he breathed. “The Black estates should go to me. Everyone who actually matters knows that. I will not tolerate this—“

“Shut up, Burke,” said Harry. He didn't realize how hard his voice would be until he said it. Burke stared at him in shock, and Harry went on, not daring to back off now that he'd started this, keeping his tone low and measured. “If you cannot accept that Regulus Black is who he says he is, and the rightful heir of the Black estates, then you may leave, and consider our alliance officially broken. I see little to no value in an ally who chooses to bring up obscure legal disputes on the eve of battle, let alone one who will not listen to reasonable explanations.”

Burke's face went through several different colors in the space of half a minute. Then he sank slowly back down in his chair, and stared at the floor.

“I do want to matter,” he whispered. “I do want to be part of this alliance.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. “Then control yourself,” he hissed, and glanced at the others. “Does anyone else have a problem

with this?"

None of them did. A strange half-smile lingered on Henrietta's face, but other than that, there was not even a halfway objectionable expression. Harry nodded, and took his chair, finally.

"Voldemort is attacking the Muggles through their underground system," he said, deciding to lay it out in blunt terms, so that no one else could raise more objections to imaginary obstacles. "He's using wooden disks to do so—disks that will crack apart the stone at the easiest points between the Muggle and the wizarding sections of the tunnels, to permit his Death Eaters entrance. I've spoken with the southern goblins, and they did agree to use their magic to protect the tunnels. But I don't know everything about Voldemort's plan, like why he's attacking Muggles in particular, and I think we should be on our guard." He hesitated, but decided that he had to reveal the next piece of information. If he didn't, then he might get some of his allies killed. "I've also heard, though not confirmed as yet, that Voldemort is attacking Muggleborn children who are too young to attend Hogwarts. He got their names thanks to Mulciber entering the school last year. He can drain their magic and make his own stronger."

"No, he can't," said Mortimer, rather pompously. "There were no reports of that during the First War."

"How would you know?" Charles asked, his voice soft and dangerous. "You weren't in the country at the time."

Mortimer flushed, and Harry decided that it was time to intervene again. "His draining ability has grown stronger since his resurrection," he said. "As I said, I haven't been able to confirm this as yet, but it could mean that he'll be considerably stronger than we ever expected. Retreat, if he's there. Leave him up to me."

"Potter."

Harry glanced questioningly at Ignifer, who was leaning forward. "Why are you so confident that you can handle him?" she demanded. "We're your allies. Let us help you."

Harry sighed. He would have to bring this up, too, it seemed. "I can do the same thing, if need be," he said. "I've swallowed some of his magic in the past, and made it part of my own."

"Then you could take power in the same way," said Mortimer. "Find a few willing volunteers of your own. Problem solved."

Harry saw his older allies—the Malfoys, Hawthorn, Adalrico—shake their heads sadly. Harry tried as best he could to keep his temper while answering. Mortimer was valuable mostly as a contact point among other families, Narcissa had told him, since he was the heir of an important pureblood line, fop though he was. That meant Harry had to treat him well. It didn't mean that he had to have any real respect for his intelligence, only seem as if he had. "I would rather not do that. No wizard or witch would like having his or her magic drained, and I don't think as many would be willing to become volunteers as you think."

"If it's for the good of the wizarding world, they should," said Mortimer.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Are you volunteering?"

Mortimer recoiled. "I am a *pureblood* heir," he spluttered. "I was thinking—Muggleborns or something." He waved a hand. "Someone who doesn't matter all that much to the future of our world."

"I don't see a difference between Muggleborns and purebloods," said Harry mildly. He was aware of several of his allies' gazes sharpening. He did not care. He would make this clear, too. In a way, he found it hard to imagine that they hadn't already known it. "I would take magic only from someone like Voldemort who's proven himself all but irredeemable, or from someone who willingly offered it to me. I've only ever used my draining ability to defend myself. It will stay that way."

A silence succeeded his words. Then Ignifer asked, "So what exactly do you want us to do, Potter?"

Harry let out a small sigh. *No open complaints. That's progress, of a sort.* "Work with me," he said. "We need to set up a strategy to confine the Death Eaters if they do break through. I need to know more about what each of you can do, beyond the obvious, to know where best to put you."

Ignifer volunteered first, as Harry had suspected she would. "I am best with fire magic," she said softly. "I can call flame hot enough to burn stone, if that's necessary."

“I’d like to have you at one of the entrances to the London Underground, then,” Harry told her. “If worst comes to worst, we might need you to bring one of the tunnels down on the Death Eaters’ heads. Do you have any objection to working with goblins?”

Ignifer shook her head. Harry nodded back. “I’ll owl the hanarz and ask her to fix you a position, then.”

“Illusions are my strength,” said Honoria. “And I can—well, I can pass very quickly between point and point, if that’s what you need someone to do.” She looked pleased with herself, and disinclined to reveal what about her might permit her to do that.

Harry glanced at Snape, whose eyes were narrowed. Snape gave him a barely perceptible nod. He’d used enough Legilimency to see that Honoria wasn’t lying or exaggerating, then.

“You’re messenger,” Harry told her, and Honoria squeaked as if that pleased her. “Secondary line of defense.” He turned expectantly to the others.

Slowly, he worked out where they would be best placed. Most of them would be best guarding the critical junction points in the tunnels, Harry decided. The biggest problem was that they had no idea how many points Voldemort might strike at, and he would certainly have more Death Eaters than Harry had defenders. So they would keep their strategy light and fast-moving, with everyone ready to retreat and call on the goblins for help if too many Death Eaters managed to break through, and they would stay connected by means of Honoria and a messenger spell that Lucius quietly offered to teach everyone else. Regulus and Snape would act as guards for Harry. Harry wasn’t happy about that part of it, but had the sense to keep his objections quiet, since he knew neither Regulus nor Snape would be moved.

Regulus was grinning by the time they were done, his gray eyes sparkling in a way that reminded Harry painfully of Sirius’s. “I have some toys at home that might just help,” he mused.

Harry could feel himself relaxing, just a bit, as the realization that they had a strategy pushed into him. It still wasn’t *perfect*. Voldemort would still be hard to defeat. But Harry thought now, with some hope, of everyone actually managing to survive the equinox, and the Muggles being safe.

If everyone just does as we hope they will do. If we can manage to hold this together.

“Oh, by the way, Harry,” Regulus told him casually, as the rest of his allies were filing out the door, “I thought you should know that Severus agreed to let you become my heir.”

Harry shot Snape a betrayed look, and got a flat glare in retaliation, which promised detention if he opened his mouth. Harry huffed, and kept quiet, but he was already thinking up ways to convince Regulus otherwise.

It’s one thing for me to have guards in the middle of battle. I’m probably Voldemort’s primary target, by now. But for Merlin’s sake, Regulus needs to get over this silly idea. He could still meet someone whom he wants to marry, or a child he wants to adopt.

I was right. It is like having two guardians, and neither one of them listens to me.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Three: Up From Beneath

The first thing Harry noticed when he woke on the morning of the autumnal equinox was that Argutus was blue.

He blinked and reached for his glasses, slipping them on before he looked again. But no, his eyes had not deceived him. The little Omen snake was swarming with blue, color that bent and rippled and ran over his scales with his movement, as though he were a moving mirror pointed at an ocean scene.

Harry murmured, “Why do you look like that?”

Argutus woke and tilted his head to look down at his body. “*I must be foretelling a vision of the future,*” he said, sounding pleased with himself. “*I don’t know what it means yet. I think I will in a few months. Do you know what it means?*” He nudged Harry’s hand with an affectionate push of his neck.

Harry tried to pick him up, but Argutus slithered free easily and waited until Harry lowered his left arm and let him crawl up it. “No,” he said. “And do you mean that you’ll know what this glimpse of the future means in a few months, or how to sense what a vision means then?”

“What a vision means.” Argutus wriggled and got comfortable on Harry’s shoulder as Harry went towards the loo. He liked the sensation of hot water cascading over his scales, and would not listen when Harry told him that he was a decadent little snake. *“I can almost grasp the meaning right now, but it’s floating just out of reach. I am only a young Omen snake as yet. Give me time.”*

Young, but curious and arrogant as hell, Harry thought, with a shake of his head. Argutus regularly left his shoulder now to slither around the school and “investigate” what other people were doing. Since he couldn’t understand English, he came back with all kinds of wild and preposterous tales. If Harry could believe Argutus, half the school was plotting against him, and every spell was practiced for the sole purpose of either affecting Harry somehow or affecting an innocent Omen snake who was only trying to find interesting things to see.

He dwelt on the thoughts as long as he could. They were amusing, and they might help to keep his mind away from the battle that would be rising soon.

Any moment, he kept expecting a letter from Madam Marchbanks or the hanarz telling him that the attack had begun, but he got through breakfast—and another inflammatory article from the reporter he didn’t recognize, this time hinting that Harry had used Dark magic on his parents—without one arriving. Now they were in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Acies was having them write down all the definitions of Dark they knew so far. She’d given no reason for it.

Well, I know the reason, Harry thought, as he finished his list and racked his brain for one more possibility. *She’ll probably tell us how inadequate they are in a moment.*

Wildness, solitary magic, compulsion, deception...those were the four definitions of Dark magic he knew, and everything else he’d come up with was a variation on those. Harry frowned at his parchment, and hoped against hope that his brain might conjure more if he just concentrated.

Halfway through a period of intense concentration, he realized that he was reviewing the battle plans in his head, and gave up with a little sigh. Pansy glanced quickly at him, then looked away, as though trying to pretend that he wasn’t of interest to her. Harry sat back and thought about the plans one more time.

Snape and Regulus, who was due in an hour, would remain in the school with him until the attack actually began, and then go with him to the battlefield—or battle tunnel, as Harry supposed it might more properly be called. Honoria was acting as messenger. Most of his allies, the ones without Dark Marks on their arms, were holding positions in the junctions between the Muggle world and the wizarding one. Lucius, Hawthorn, and Adalrico had chosen those wizarding tunnels most likely to be attacked, and were well away from the *hanarz*’s chains, which would otherwise strike at them.

He wasn’t forgetting anything. That was what they had planned. No one had sent him a letter saying that he couldn’t do his part. Harry had discreetly warned the Ministry, through Madam Marchbanks, that something momentous might happen today. He didn’t dare be too open, with any of his Light allies. The balance between them and his Dark allies was shaky, the more so with all the opposition stirring against Harry among the Light purebloods. Besides, many in the Ministry would go slightly mad if they knew the southern goblins were free to make their own decisions about protecting the tunnels under Muggle London like that.

“Read me your list, Miss Bulstrode.”

Harry sat up, blinking, and flushing a bit as Acies’s dangerous eyes passed across his face and he realized that she had surely noticed his distraction. *That’s the bad thing about having a professor with a mind that’s partially a dragon’s. You can’t fool her.*

Millicent cleared her throat and began to read. If she had been at all startled by their professor’s abrupt demand, she hid it well. “Dark is often wildness,” she said. “Examples are the magic that appears on Walpurgis Night, the magic in birthing rituals, and the use of Dark creatures like dragons. At the same time, Dark Arts often rely on compulsion. Webs, for example.” There was probably no force on earth that could have kept her from winking at Harry at that point, and Harry didn’t try to stop her. “These forces are usually seen as coming together in the wildness of the caster’s will. They restrain others so that they may be free and unrestrained themselves.”

“Very good, Miss Bulstrode,” said Acies softly. “Three points to Slytherin. And do any of you know how the spells often considered Dark Arts—the Unforgivable Curses, for example—fit in with these definitions?”

There were a few shrugs and mutters. Harry cocked his head in curiosity. Remus had been the first Defense professor to teach them some of the theory behind Dark Arts, and of course the disguised Mulciber had shown them the Unforgivable Curses, but Harry hadn’t known that the theory could account for specific spells so well. He’d got used to wielding what magic needed to be wielded, and then working out the theoretical ramifications of what he’d done later.

“Dark Arts represent a partial sacrifice of will,” said Acies. “Many wizards and witches are safe even with those spells called evil if they do not surrender their whole wills, if they remember that the use of some curses may mean time in Azkaban or the death and ruin of people they love. But when they give themselves up completely, trade free will for wildness, then they are likely to cast a *Crucio* where a far milder pain spell would do instead.”

She swept her head around to stare at the rest of the class. “When we begin practicing with Dark Arts, I will expect you to keep this in mind. Retain your free will, always. No amount of power can make up for its sacrifice.”

“Professor Merryweather,” said Susan Bones, her voice both fascinated and horrified. “Are you saying that—that Dark Arts are *all right* as long as we don’t lose ourselves completely?”

“I am considering them from the perspective of the wielder, Miss Bones,” said Acies, implacably. “From the perspective of the victim, they are of course different. But it seems that you are considering that a pain curse must be a Dark Arts spell. Does that include *Anapneo*?”

Susan frowned. “But that just helps someone who’s choking. It’s not a pain curse!”

“Yes, it is,” said Acies. “It causes pain.”

“That’s different from something like *Crucio*,” Susan argued.

“Three points to Hufflepuff,” Acies said. “You are distinguishing among them already. That is an integral part of Defense Against the Dark Arts, the inner defense and ability to think rationally about spells, no matter their effects. Another way to sacrifice free will is to give in to fear.” Harry told himself that Acies wasn’t looking significantly in Margaret’s direction, that he’d just imagined it. “When one begins to scream in fear of Dark Arts, one has surrendered and made a whole sacrifice where a partial one—that of caution—is required.”

Harry heard Margaret make a rude sound under her breath, but he didn’t get to hear more than that as his scar erupted in pain.

Even as he went to one knee, seeing Millicent reach out towards him and Pansy make an aborted movement, Harry remained calm. *I expected this. This is probably the first sign of the attack. Voldemort is so excited that he can’t control his glee any more, and the link between us is open.*

He quickly realized he was mistaken when he opened his eyes again and saw, not the Defense classroom, but a misty dreamworld, like the vision he’d had of the Weasley house when Voldemort attacked it. He stood up quickly, and stared in several directions. He was on a beach, near the rolling sea.

He recognized it—the beach in Northumberland where Death Eaters had attacked him, where he had run with unicorns, where he and his father and Connor had celebrated Midsummer.

“Potter,” said Voldemort from behind him, his voice laced with self-satisfaction. “I had looked forward to meeting you here. But I see that you have guessed wrong. How disappointing. *Up from beneath*, Harry. Any moment now, the Muggles will hear the singing come from their river.”

The pain in his scar grew intense then, and the dreamworld broke apart around him. Harry came to on the floor, with Millicent and Acies bending over him, sheltering him from the too-curious gazes of his other classmates.

Harry lay paralyzed for a moment, trying to work out what Voldemort meant, why the hell he would be on a beach instead of in London, why he would be talking about singing, of all things—

And then Argutus crawled towards his face, hissing in concern, and Harry caught another glimpse of his blue and shifting scales.

The color of water reflecting the sky.

An attack by water. Not the tunnels.

Singing.

The sirens Voldemort freed!

Harry, gasping, felt his mind leap over several steps to arrive at the logical conclusion. He'd heard the words "up from beneath" in his vision of Voldemort, and simply assumed that they meant an attack through tunnels. He'd had no real proof that they did. And Bellatrix had been speaking of telling their allies about the attack, allies to whom Voldemort had promised the aid of the basilisks, but only if they needed it.

I was a fool, Harry thought grimly, his new crystalline thoughts unfurling quickly. And "their river." Voldemort's sending the sirens up the Thames.

Harry let his magic flood through him, dimming the pain and raising him to his feet so quickly that both Millicent and Acies had to scramble out of the way. His mind was still racing, and he didn't immediately move, other than to wipe away the blood pouring from his scar, because it was getting in his way.

Those wooden disks he used—perhaps the tangle of lines on them represented rivers, after all, and not tunnels. That doesn't tell me where he is, though, does it? He could be anywhere in London. He might be somewhere else entirely, contacting and controlling the sirens by means of those disks, and I won't know. So what's the best course to find him?

A Death Eater can Apparate to his side.

Harry started out of the Defense classroom, with the intent of finding Snape. Plans raced around his head and chattered a mile a minute. He knew what he would do the moment he found Snape, and he knew what weapons he would fetch from the trunk in his room, and he knew which of his allies he would try to contact—the only ones whom he had the *means* to contact.

"Harry."

He blinked and turned around. It was so hard to remember that Millicent might be concerned for him. The knowledge that he had been wrong, his allies all in place to counteract a plan that Voldemort had no intention of using, seemed to have moved him into a different world, and if she had something useful to say, then she should say it and be done. Harry stared at Millicent, and she looked quickly away from him, as though his eyes frightened her.

"Good luck," she said softly.

Harry nodded once, and then sprinted out of the Defense classroom, heading for the dungeons. His mind dragged up information he had noted but not thought of consciously until now, when it might prove useful. *Snape's teaching Potions right now. The classroom, not his office.*

He ran. He had not used his training in sheer speed very often lately, but he hadn't let himself go, either. He knew the best way of taking stairs, of sliding quickly around corners with an eye as to whether anyone was coming towards him or not, and how to let himself fall and roll when it was the best way to get somewhere quickly. He was at the door of the Potions classroom before he had known he could be.

Before he could knock, someone grabbed his shoulder, and he whipped around, though his magic didn't rise in defense. The touch of the hand was too familiar for that.

It was Connor, grimacing and touching his forehead. "I felt him," he said quietly. "He's happy, isn't he? And I know that he was talking to you. I figured you'd go to Snape."

Harry considered Connor for a single rapid moment. His brother had never fought, not in a proper battle, and it might be suicide to take him along.

On the other hand, Connor's jaw was set, indicating he wasn't going anywhere, and there was the chance, if only a chance, that

his compulsion gift could be useful in reversing the sirens' voices.

"He's attacking with the sirens," said Harry. "Not in the tunnels, the way I thought." He put his shoulder to the door of the Potions classroom and banged it open, interrupting Snape in mid-speech.

Snape caught his eye and didn't waste his breath on anything as trivial as a scolding for the interruption, instead taking several long steps forward. Harry met him next to a table full of wide-eyed third-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, and motioned curtly with his head for him to bend down. Some guardian part of his mind had warned him that it would be for the best if everyone around them didn't have the idea that Snape carried the Dark Mark on his forearm. It was known, of course, but students this young didn't need the reminder.

"Voldemort's attacking London, but with the sirens, not up the tunnels," said Harry. "I need you to Apparate me to him, following your brand. I'll fetch a few things, and then we'll go."

Snape did not argue. Rather, he turned to his class, snapped, "Write me a foot-long essay on the properties of Calming Potions, due tomorrow," and then followed Harry out of the classroom. Harry lengthened his steps the moment they were out of sight of the silent and staring third-years. The common room was his goal now, and the gifts his allies had given him which might help in battle. He had the means to summon at least two of his allies from their mistaken positions in London, and they could tell the others. Harry only hoped that they would be willing to follow the sudden change in plans, as well as willing to let former Death Eaters Side-Along Apparate them.

"How did you find out about this?" Snape demanded behind him.

"He contacted me in the middle of Defense," said Harry, and wiped at another stubborn blob of blood creeping down his face. *Damn scar. It's rather annoying.* "Just had to laugh and brag about his victory, I suppose, and not seeing me there."

That was something else Harry hadn't considered.

He expected to see me there. He expected me to have figured out his plan.

There was proof positive that he suspected Harry was spying on him in his visions. Harry grimaced in resignation. *I can't trust the scar link to give me reliable information on his movements anymore.*

I suppose that I'll just have to take on the war on the offensive, then. Well, let's. You won't know what bit you, Tom.

They reached the door of the Slytherin common room, and Harry snapped, "Pureblood dignity," making it slide back. A few students with free periods, lounging about the place, stared at him as he walked past. Their stares only intensified when their Head of House and a Gryffindor followed.

Harry ignored them. It was hardly a secret that Snape opposed Voldemort anymore, not when he'd openly attacked Bellatrix at the end of third year. He was more concerned right now in running over the things he could take with him to the battle. Any slim advantage he had over Voldemort right now would be helpful.

He walked over to his trunk the moment he entered his room. Fawkes, sitting on his bed, opened one eye and gave a sleepy chirp, and then sat up again and chirped more forcefully when he saw Harry kneel down and start rifling through his belongings.

Out came Honoria's whistle, which Harry hung around his neck, and the dragon scale Ignifer had given him. Harry hesitated, thought about waving it right now to summon her, and then shook his head and stuck it in his pocket. If he waved it now, she couldn't come to him anyway through Hogwarts's anti-Apparition wards. Better to do it once he reached the scene of the battle, and then there would be a person beyond the former Death Eaters who knew where to find him.

He drew out the flowering vine that Hawthorn had given him for Christmas last year, and leaned towards one of the blossoms. He had to hope it would work when she wasn't at home, but crouched in one of the tunnels beneath London, getting ready to deflect an attack she thought was coming at any second.

"Hawthorn?" he asked.

He heard a startled breath, but though he stared hard into the flower, he couldn't see anything. Well, she had only told him it would transmit voices, and she presumably knew her own enchantment. Hawthorn responded a moment later, her voice intense.

“Harry? You’re using the vine I gave you?”

“Yes,” said Harry, as he sorted through other items in his trunk, using his stump to move them and his hand to actually pick them up. *Alliance compass—I don’t need it, but Connor might, if he gets separated from the others in the battle and needs to know which direction to head in.* He tossed the compass to his brother, who caught it, looking startled. *Books, robes, maps, no, no, no—ah, the knife that Adalrico gave me!* Harry hung that at his belt as he continued talking to Hawthorn. “Plan’s changed. Voldemort’s not attacking the tunnels. He’s sending sirens up the Thames, and maybe other rivers, to sing at the Muggles. I don’t know where he is, but you can find him through your Dark Mark, can’t you? I need you to alert the others, and Apparate the ones who have no Mark to the site of the battle.”

No complaints, no hesitation, no remarks about Hawthorn standing a good chance of being killed if she went into a nest of Death Eaters. She said only, “Of course, Harry,” and then there came the sound of quick footsteps on stone, an odd thing to hear through the blossoms of a plant.

“Thank you,” Harry said, not knowing if she heard him or not, and then put the vine aside and scanned the rest of his trunk. The glass serpent caught his eye, glowing almost completely blue, and he scooped that out and into his pocket. A good thing to have an emergency Portkey around, whether it was for him or someone else. He was sure it would work to transport someone else to Malfoy Manor, since it had worked for Vince.

Draco.

Harry hesitated. He knew that Draco had Ancient Runes right now. The classroom wasn’t that far away, and since Harry had no idea if the attack had already begun or not, and was doing his best not to act like an idiot and dash into things, he knew he had the time to take him along.

Do I want to? He would be going into danger—

Then Harry shook his head, remembering the conversation he’d had with Draco last year on the day he freed the unicorns and Draco made him understand exactly what his love felt like. *No. I told him I would never make him wait behind like some soldier’s spouse who couldn’t fight. He can fight, and he would want to come with me. At the very least, I’ve got to offer him the choice.*

He slid to his feet, closed the trunk, and glanced down at Argutus. “Do you want to stay here?”

“*No! This is interesting.*” The little Omen snake sounded rapturous. Harry shook his head and held his arm up for Fawkes, who flew to his shoulder.

“We’re stopping by the Ancient Runes classroom to fetch Draco,” he said. “And then we need to go briefly into the Forbidden Forest.”

“Do we have time?” Connor demanded, his eyes flaring with a courage that struck Harry as inescapably Gryffindor. “There could be innocent people dying right now.”

“There could be,” said Harry steadily, hoping that his brother paid attention to his words and not the death glare Snape was throwing him. “But I don’t know that, and I’d rather not rush into this. I don’t even know where Voldemort is, not for certain. We’ve got to go, yes, but we have some time.”

“Harry is correct,” said Snape, in his softest voice. “I, for one, would rather see him take care with his safety than rush blindly into things on the mere hope that he could save someone’s life.”

Harry arched his eyebrows at him. “See? I *do* learn,” he said, and then he was out of the room, running across the Slytherin common room, then towards the stairs out of the dungeons and up to the Ancient Runes class. Plans were still running around his mind, chattering at him, but some of them would necessarily be held in abeyance until he saw what the battlefield looked like.

He didn’t bother begging the professor’s pardon when he finally stepped into the middle of Ancient Runes, just locked eyes with Draco, who was sitting across the classroom in a straight line from the door, and said, “We’re going to do battle with the Dark Lord. Are you coming?”

Draco blinked once, such a hard blink that it seemed to clear out most of his surprise. Then he nodded, stood, and scooped up his wand from his bag, following Harry out. Harry waited for him to come up and stand at his right shoulder, unable to express the

satisfaction he felt in mere words.

He did give Draco one fierce smile, which Draco returned with interest. Then they were off again, and Harry felt the smile drop from his face as he raced through calculations of time and distance, and concluded that they had a few minutes to spare. He would ask for aid, but if the question couldn't travel fast enough through the Forbidden Forest, then they would have to depart.

Fawkes sat up on his shoulder and gave a deep warble. Harry smiled at him.

"Can you tell the Many that I'd like their help?" he asked.

Fawkes uttered a resigned sound at having to deal with snakes, and then rose and vanished in a ball of flame. Harry focused on reaching the doors out of the school, his mind throwing possibilities at him.

What happens if Voldemort's in London? Then we battle him in front of a bunch of Muggles, I suppose, and it's work for the Obliviators later. I'd still rather use magic in front of Muggles than sacrifice their lives.

What happens if he's somewhere else? It should be near water. We'll have to depend on our magic, and hope that he doesn't have a large number of Death Eaters with him.

What happens if Draco or Connor gets hurt?

Harry narrowed his eyes. *Then Voldemort, or whatever Death Eater did it, gets to know what pain feels like.*

Can we count on any other aid from magical creatures? No, I don't think so. I know I can transport the Many, but I couldn't take more than a few Runespoors, and the centaurs are too big for us to Apparate. The unicorns might aid us, I suppose, but that's entirely their own affair, and we can't count on it.

Do we have a way to contact Regulus? I guess we can hope he feels something strange through the Dark Mark and comes to us, but we can't count on that, either. I should have thought of firecalling him while I was in the school, but I didn't, and it would have meant a side trip, anyway. If we all survive this, then I'll make sure we have some faster way of contacting each other. A mirror might do the trick.

Harry was a bit surprised that he hadn't tried this method of planning before he leaped before. It wasn't really simple, but it worked. Of course, it was probably only working because he had no idea if Voldemort was already snaring and torturing innocent Muggles or not.

And why is he attacking Muggles anyway? What does he want from them?

It doesn't really matter, I suppose. Nothing good.

They reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, in time to meet a proud Fawkes and a writhing tangle of the Many. Harry knelt down, thinking just in time to pull Argutus into the collar of his robes.

The tiny green-gold cobras poured up his body and coiled around his legs, his chest, his neck, and his face, hissing greetings all the while. One of them hung around Harry's throat, ignoring Argutus as if he were a piece of string, and said, "*We have come, because you helped free us from the web that would have taken us. It took you a long time to decide that you wanted repayment for that debt.*"

"Well, I want it now," said Harry simply, and then glanced up at Snape to make sure that he was speaking English. "Do you think that you can Apparate me with the snakes clinging to me?"

Snape nodded, and then looked at Draco and Connor, who wore identical mutinous expressions. "I will come back for you," he said. "Do *not* try to follow, or what you receive from me will make being splinched look amusing."

Connor cowered. Draco just glared at him, a steady look that said Snape had *better* come back.

Harry shook his head and turned away again, this time heading for Hogsmeade and the edge of the wards around the school. The shape of the Portkey in his pocket bumped and jostled, and so did the unfamiliar weight of the blade at his belt and the whistle around his neck, which the Many were curiously twining around. *I hope these will be useful after all.*

They reached the edge of the wards. Harry glanced once at Snape, who seized his left arm with his right hand. He shook his own left sleeve, and his Dark Mark came free, gleaming black.

“Can you still Apparate to him even though he hasn’t summoned you?” Harry asked, abruptly realizing that there might be a flaw in his plan.

“We can find him, if we concentrate,” said Snape quietly. “It is not widely-known, but we may go to him even when he does not summon us, if we are willing to expend the necessary magic.” He narrowed his eyes. “He may be actively keeping me away, of course, and then this will not work, but I do not think so. He wants you there, Harry.”

His eyes conveyed a different message. *Endanger your own life on purpose, and you will have to deal with me.*

Harry nodded, in response to both messages, and then leaned close to Snape. The Many and Argutus both hissed encouragement. Harry saw Snape close his eyes, and his face became pale and strained.

The snake on his arm, black and slickly gleaming, unwound from the skull, and conducted an obscene little dance towards Snape’s elbow. Harry stared, and then the world around them vanished and whirled around and squeezed him through a tight tunnel, and he was landing on sand and heard the roar of the surf in the background.

He wasn’t that surprised to find himself on the Northumberland beach. He grimaced. *Bastard. Probably chose the place on purpose, hoping to throw me off balance.*

Harry didn’t feel thrown off balance. He felt focused, sharp, his mind clear and rich with purpose. He answered the squeeze of Snape’s hand on his shoulder with a quick nod, and then turned around, looking for Voldemort, even as he drew Ignifer’s dragon scale from his pocket and gave it a quick wave.

He caught the sensation of familiar magic, a powerful glamour, and stared at it. His own power went to work, wearing it away. When it fell, he could see Voldemort standing with a circle of wooden disks spread around him, one hand extended and a low humming noise rising from his throat, or perhaps his robes. The purple shapes of two basilisks coiled at his feet. Behind him crouched two naked Death Eaters, one man and one woman. Harry opened his mouth in a snarl. *Greyback and Whitecheek.*

Voldemort looked at him, and smiled.

And then his magic rose and unfolded around him.

He *had* been feeding on Muggleborn children, Harry knew at once, or at least on someone. The feeling of dark, vicious magic that rose from him like greasy smoke was immeasurably stronger than it had been at the Burrow, perhaps twice as powerful. Harry knew it when the magic turned, coiling like one of the basilisks, and then shot straight at them.

At him, and at Snape, who still had not Disapparated.

“Go!” Harry screamed, and then reached out and poured his will into the goal of getting Snape to go back to Hogwarts for Draco and Connor, the way he had once forced Evan Rosier to go back to his lord. He heard the *crack* of Snape vanishing, and had a moment to feel satisfied.

Then Voldemort’s magic struck him like a whale’s back.

Harry went sprawling, and found he couldn’t get a breath. The magic held him down, lying on top of him, squeezing every bit of air out of his lungs, flowing and overflowing and draping and slamming down. There was more, always more, and Voldemort pinned him and yet had the power to do whatever spell to command the sirens he was pouring through the wooden disks.

“You thought you could challenge me, Harry,” Harry heard Voldemort whisper, beyond the ringing in his ears and the blackness teasing at his vision from the lack of breath. “How wrong you were, how wrong *all* the challengers to Lord Voldemort’s power always are.”

“*Flagellum Ardoris!*”

Harry heard a scream, smelled smoke, saw a burst of light. Then the pressure on him eased, enough that he could draw in a breath.

Air had never tasted so sweet. He rolled over and drew his own magic up, weaving linked Shield Charms around himself, so that he wouldn't get taken by such surprise again.

When he turned his head, he saw Ignifer Apollonis dancing around Voldemort's circle of wooden disks, igniting one after another. In her hand was a whip of flame, glowing red and orange and gold, and white where it ran into her clenched fist, and cracking down with enormous force at the slightest twist of her arm. Everywhere it touched, it burned, and already four or five of the disks were gone.

She saved my life.

And Voldemort was about to take hers, now that he was past the shock of surprise and drawing back his magic for another strike. He had his wand leveled, Harry saw. He could and would cast a Killing Curse without hesitation.

Harry focused on Voldemort's wand and thought, *Expelliarmus!*

It probably only worked because Voldemort hadn't been expecting an attack from that angle, but Harry didn't care. The yew wand still soared from Voldemort's hand to his. Harry quickly threw it down on the sand behind him and took a step backwards, trying to snap it in half. It resisted the weight of his foot, though. Voldemort had probably enchanted it to protect itself against such a simple tactic. Pity.

"What shall we do?"

Harry started. He'd forgotten about the Many, involved in the battle as he was. "Attack the large snakes and the ones in the circle who smell like wolves," he said. "Bite them, spit into their eyes, do whatever you can to make sure that they don't interfere."

He heard the *cracks* of Apparition as more people arrived—allies or Death Eaters, he couldn't tell. The Many left his body in a glorious wave, pouring directly towards the circle. Voldemort was hissing to the basilisks now, commanding them to the attack, and Harry could only hope the hive cobras would survive. They had one enormous advantage: their mind was collective, and could move to any body in the hive at an instant's notice, which meant the basilisks would have to kill them all to actually defeat them.

Harry felt a weight against his shoulder, and Draco whispered, "I'm here. What should I do?"

"Cover your ears," Harry suggested, and blew Honoria's whistle.

Someone roared with laughter behind him. Harry turned to see Karkaroff sagging, his arms wrapped around his belly as he tried, gamely, to stifle his laughter and take a few more steps forward. Behind him were other Death Eaters, though it looked as though Hawthorn and at least one of his allies were hastening over the small hills and down to the beach.

The basilisks were engaged with the Many, and Greyback and Whitecheek were among the whistle's victims.

But Voldemort was free to pay attention to other things now, and his gaze locked with Harry's.

Harry felt his scar blaze into life. He gritted his teeth and moved forward, trying to retain the clear head that had brought him here. Voldemort was working *some* sort of spell with the wooden disks. Harry thought it was to control the sirens, though he had only his guess. That meant the disks had to be destroyed. Of course, Voldemort's magic was coiling protectively around them now, making that easier said than done.

Needs must, Harry thought, reluctantly, and began to siphon Voldemort's magic.

Voldemort realized what was happening at once, of course, but the moment he moved to defend himself, Harry flicked his gaze to one of the disks that Ignifer—helpless with laughter, just like the rest of them—hadn't managed to destroy, and thought, *Reducto!*

The disk blasted apart. Voldemort narrowed his eyes, and the pain in Harry's scar increased until he sagged to his knees. He felt Draco put his arms around him from behind, and leaned back into that comforting embrace, even as his body flooded with foul, tainted power.

Harry hated the feeling of it. He was drowning in slime and ashes, and he couldn't imagine making that magic part of himself. But he knew that he had to keep on drawing it. Voldemort was too strong. In a moment, he'd come up with some way to both

defend the circle of disks and fight Harry, and then the battle would turn in the Death Eaters' favor.

The relentless roar and hiss of the waves surged up in Harry's mind between the silence of one thought and the next, giving him his answer.

He took a deep breath and opened himself wide, the jaws of the snake inside him stretching and stretching. He dropped all the other magic, even the Shield Charms he'd strung around himself. Voldemort could have taken him in that moment, if he'd reacted fast enough.

He didn't. Harry seized his magic instead, and opened the siphon at the other end, pulling Voldemort's power from him and dumping it directly into the sea.

In moments, the feeling of slime and ashes diminished, and so did the sensation that the magic he'd swallowed was about to get out of control. Harry was vaguely aware of figures fighting around him—someone must have worked a *Finite Incantatem* to end the spell of Honoria's whistle—but he was much more interested in draining all of Voldemort's magic that he could.

Voldemort started to reach for Harry's own power, and then hesitated, obviously worried about the safety of the disks. Harry made him pay dearly for that moment, ripping into his core, digging into the magic that Voldemort had been born with, and tearing part of it away.

His enemy roared.

And the pain in Harry's scar increased until it became the world.

Sand and sea and Draco's arms and the pale, red-eyed face in front of him vanished. Harry knew that, yes, this *was* worse than the pain he'd endured when Bellatrix cut off his hand, and still he kept swallowing. He didn't think he could stop at this point, or close the siphon—one end in him, the other in the ocean, the one pulling, the other dumping.

"*Reducto!*"

Merlin only knew how that spell got through to him, when nothing else had, but it might have had something to do with Voldemort's attention turning elsewhere. Harry lifted his head, blinking, dazed, and saw Draco in front of him, shattering a second wooden disk as he watched.

Voldemort was narrowing his eyes, obviously unable to believe that a boy had done this, had dared to defy him—

And then he paused, and laughed softly in Harry's direction. "This is the boy that was at the center of your mind," he said, in a voice weakened by pain and rage. "The one you care about. I shall take such pleasure in destroying him."

Voldemort's gloating was a mistake, Harry thought, in at least two ways. First, it gave Harry the anger to rip off another great swathe of Voldemort's unnatural magic, and send it running away into the sea.

Second, it gave Lucius Malfoy time to get there.

"*Cremo!*"

The rest of Voldemort's wooden disks burst into flame. Voldemort screamed like something dying, like something wounded, and wheeled to face Lucius, who had just lowered his wand and was looking at his former lord with no expression whatsoever on his face.

Harry gathered himself. Voldemort's magic was building, shifting, no doubt aiming at Lucius. His wand had gone soaring back to his hand by now, and while his wandless power might be drained, he was still dangerous. An *Avada Kedavra* could still lay Lucius low.

Harry imagined his enemy utterly drained of magic, and struck out wildly with his will, aiming straight at everything Voldemort was.

It didn't work, as Harry had thought it wouldn't, ripping an intense wound but not a mortal one. Voldemort turned around, his eyes narrowed, and then reached out and pinched Harry's siphon shut. Harry gasped at the pain, but felt a healthy dose of

satisfaction to go with it. *He should have done that long since. We rattled him. And we utterly destroyed whatever plan he had to capture or kill the Muggles. I hope.*

A voice spoke from behind Harry, saying his name. Connor's voice.

Voldemort turned. He spoke no word, but a boiling black light left his wand, a spell Harry didn't recognize, aimed straight at Connor. Harry wasn't quick enough to stop it.

Harry *did* have the time to think about what should happen in the next few moments, as the chattering plans in his head shut up and one voice alone remained, one that assessed the risk. It was an unknown curse, one that Connor was more than likely not to survive. And if Connor died or was destroyed, then Harry knew he would not long survive his brother. The guilt alone would tear him apart.

On the other hand, he had at least a chance of being able to survive the curse, whatever it did, since his magic was so much stronger than Connor's, and Voldemort had been seriously weakened. And he had former Death Eaters among his allies. There was a chance that one of them had seen Voldemort use this curse before and would know how to counteract it. They would have the motivation to help him where they might not want to help Connor.

Sometimes, his training in sacrifice was a wonderful thing, to let him make such decisions so fast and so clearly.

He rose and flung himself in the way of the curse.

Black walls snapped shut around him, his mind closed in on itself, and then he tumbled into darkness, and silence, and cold.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Four: Psychology on the Wing

Henrietta had to admit some disappointment when she finally recovered from the spell of that *stupid* whistle and found herself with only inexperienced Death Eaters to fight—students from Durmstrang, by the look of them. She shrugged as she gestured with her wand for them to come ahead. One thing opponents like this were good for was practicing her experimental spellwork.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” she said, mildly enough, but she swept her wand in a long wave, left to right, as she spoke the spell, trying as hard as she could to kill two with just the one curse.

It didn't quite work. One of the boys facing her dropped dead, and the other sagged, but came back to his feet, since just the edge of the green light had hit him. Henrietta frowned. *That's disappointing.* She put him under *Crucio* to soothe her feelings, and turned to the rest of them.

She found it hard to look at the center of the battlefield, where Potter battled the Dark Lord. It was too much like looking into the heart of the sun. Magic flared there, as attractive as the light that flared from the sun, and as dazzling. Pay too much attention to it, and Henrietta would be tempted to dash forward and hurl herself into the circle, just to feel that much power blaze around her in the moments before it consumed her.

Instincts dropped her to one knee as a Cutting Curse went over her head. She turned and gestured once, speaking the spell nonverbally, and another young Durmstrang Death Eater was swimming in his own intestines. Henrietta rolled her eyes. *Children these days. Did no one teach him to shield?*

Someone roared in front of her. Henrietta looked up in interest as a burly Death Eater came towards her, his face nearly black with rage. *Well. This looks like a more interesting opponent.*

She rose and bowed her head slightly, the formal invitation to a duel. He ignored her, and just attacked. There was a lot of raw power behind the hexes he chose, but that gave him problems when Henrietta bounced them off her Shield Charm and sent them back at him. Then he backed up, and neglected to watch his footing in the shifting sand, and went down.

Henrietta sighed. *Not a challenge after all. I wish Evan Rosier were here. He was a challenge.* She smiled a bit. Rosier had been the only Death Eater who'd tried to “recruit” her during the First War and still managed to escape; she'd killed the others. She started off restlessly across the beach, looking for someone like that, someone who appeared experienced and competent.

Her allies, such as they were, had already taken all the best pickings. Henrietta frowned as she watched Honoria dueling a tall woman with long blonde hair. The girl sent ridiculous illusions after her, and never failed to make her enemy flinch, each time. She was *playing* with her. Henrietta shook her head. Of course Honoria's illusions were powerful, but she was a halfblood, and, worse in Henrietta's eyes, the daughter of a Light-inclined wizard. She didn't deserve the opponent that chance and the vagaries of battle had gifted her with.

She drew closer to the center of the battle, after all, though she kept a solid wall of fighters between her and the Dark Lord so that she wasn't tempted to rush in. As she absently killed a Death Eater or two, she studied Potter. He was kneeling there, not doing anything much on the physical plane, but obviously draining power from the Dark Lord on the magical one. Henrietta could feel immense amounts of magic sliding through him.

And yet, Potter doesn't swallow and keep it. Remarkable.

Perhaps not so much remarkable as stupid, when you get right down to it.

Then Lucius's son destroyed one of those wooden disks the Dark Lord was so fond of, and the Dark Lord just *had* to take a moment to pause and gloat about what he would do to the boy. Henrietta nodded slowly. Yes, it seemed that she had made the right choice to follow Potter after all. The Dark Lord could not be depended on to keep his mind on the battle.

But it would be so much better if there was a way of gaining control of Potter, if I could make him do what I told him to do.

As she watched, Lucius arrived and set the rest of the disks on fire, and then a boy who was Potter's brother, from the pictures in the papers, became the target of the Dark Lord's next curse.

And Potter *stepped in the way*.

Henrietta narrowed her eyes as she watched him fall. *The papers were correct. He was raised, trained, to sacrifice himself for that boy gaping like a turkey with its mouth open to the rain.*

The seed of a plan stirred to life in her mind. She knew the end result, and the psychology of Potter's that she would manipulate, though she did not know as yet how she would achieve it.

As she had thought would happen, the Dark Lord took the moment to fold his wounded dignity around him and flee the battlefield. Perhaps he did not believe his curse would keep Potter out for long—though Potter currently lay motionless on the sand, with his brother and Lucius's son tugging frantically at his arms and Lucius himself striding towards them, hissing at them to move away. Then the green-golden snakes added to the confusion by flooding back towards Potter, away from the dead bodies of two basilisks, and as the Death Eaters Apparated out and followed their master, the rest of Potter's minions came shoving forward to gawk.

No one was paying attention to Henrietta, even when she noiselessly slid between Honoria and Burke, and no one else saw what she saw, lying free on the sand not far from Potter's head.

She stooped and picked the objects up, thought becoming action the moment she had it, and slid them into a pocket.

She did not know if she would manage to keep her little prizes undetected throughout the aftermath of the battle, which would surely involve taking Potter back to Hogwarts and hovering over his bed like good little minions. There might be someone who had seen her take them, and then she would have to hand them over. That was all right, if it happened. She would be able to pretend she'd been looking out for Potter's safety and only his safety. In fact, she should look at them more closely anyway, before she used them. They might be worthless.

But if she could keep them, and they were worth something, then she had her plan.

Henrietta smiled, and then looked back up the beach as screams echoed through the silence. *I suppose I should remove the Cruciatius Curse now.*

She went back up the beach, removed the curse, and casually dispatched the silly young Death Eater. It was doing a favor to the Dark Lord, really, to reap his ranks of the untried and the witless. He ought to thank her.

Charles narrowed his eyes as he watched the others crowd in around Potter, and Snape order them away with little more than a snap of his robes as he seemed to Apparate in to Potter's side. Charles did not speak—he did not often speak in situations like this—but stood and listened to Burke and Belville converse in hushed, agitated voices.

“...give himself up for his brother, rather than one of us, what good is he?” Belville was demanding.

“Exactly my thoughts. Exactly my thoughts.” Charles didn't need to look to know that Burke would be nodding fiercely, his jowls flapping. He hadn't met the man often, but in this case, that was long enough to take his measure. “He'd sacrifice himself for family. Very noble. Very admirable, in fact, if he were the head of a pureblood family and doing that for his heir. But he's a war-leader. He has to think of his body and his magic as the king on the chessboard, not as pawns.”

Belville murmured some agreement that Charles did not deign to listen to. He turned to follow, instead, while Snape and Malfoy, walking side by side, carried Potter's body back to Hogwarts.

Charles hated to be shoved. He made up his mind slowly. He knew himself for a cautious man. Medusa had sometimes teased him about *how* cautious he was, and how often he might have accomplished more than he did, if he'd just been a bit more quick-witted and clever on his feet.

But he'd had a clear glimpse of Potter and that black curse, and he was a father of two twin boys. He'd seen the calculation in Potter's eyes, the imperceptible moment before he'd arched up and taken the brunt of the spell. Potter had known *exactly* what he was doing. He'd taken that curse for Connor Potter the way that Owen would have to save Michael. Owen was protective of his younger brother to a fault; Charles had known that since their first year at Durmstrang, when Headmaster Karkaroff had called him in to discuss Owen's punishment for cursing a professor who'd failed Michael's History of the Dark Arts project and yelled at him. Owen had given the professor a second head that yelled constant abuse in his ears.

Potter was being a brother in that moment, not a sacrifice, and that was an impulse that Charles would not have wanted him cured of, lest he turn into another Lord. Lords, Charles had decided long ago, were those who would put their own power and their own lives even above their own flesh and blood.

Connor Potter was not yet, perhaps, at the point of knowing when he should die for his brother. *Harry* Potter, though, was exactly where he should be. That was enough for Charles. He would watch their young leader's back.

And that meant watching the greatest threat to him, which in this group was Henrietta Bulstrode. She'd stooped down and picked something up. Charles found himself very much wanting to know what it was.

Lucius kept his head bowed as Severus argued with him about the curse, its causes, and its effects. He didn't need to argue back. He knew he was right. He had seen the Dark Lord use that curse before—usually on his enemies, but sometimes on his Death Eaters, for practice. Lucius had twice seen it cured. He knew what was needed, and why their Lord had sought to hit Harry's brother and not Harry himself with it. Though the procedure would be somewhat difficult considering how stubborn young Harry was, it was not impossible that someone should enter his mind and remove the curse.

And Lucius already knew it had to be him. This was the point of view that Severus hadn't quite come around to yet, even now that they'd Apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and were skirting the village, headed for the Forbidden Forest. He still thought, poor fool, that he could enter Harry's mind and pull him out of this.

Lucius spared a moment to thank Merlin that he loved only his wife and son as much as Severus loved Harry, and that neither Narcissa nor Draco would expect him to take the kind of insane risk that Severus was talking about just because of his relationship to them. Love made men foolish. Lucius knew when to step back and step aside. If that curse had hit Narcissa, and Severus could have rescued her, then he would let Severus enter her mind, and never complained in the first place.

A deliberate footstep sounded to his left a few moments after the green-and-gold snakes flooded off Potter's body and into the trees. Lucius turned and met Narcissa's eyes. A glance told him everything he needed to know. She walked with a limp that indicated a recently healed wound. Lucius raised his eyebrows.

Narcissa smiled. “Dead,” she said, meaning the Death Eater who had done that to her.

Lucius nodded. “You knew him?”

Narcissa shrugged. “A student at Durmstrang. I could describe him.”

“Do so,” said Lucius, and set himself to listen to recollections of dark hair, unusual height, and, most importantly, a distinctive jut to the collarbone, as if it had once been broken. Easy enough to find out his family from that description, and Lucius would find out how he could hurt them, and he would.

“Lucius, are you even *listening* to me?”

Lucius turned and glanced at Severus. Thanks to Narcissa’s description and the crunch of fallen leaves under their feet as they walked through the Forest, it had been easy enough to ignore his chatter. “No, Severus. You are repeating yourself, and that will not help our Potter. You *know* what has to be done. You know that you cannot do it. And no,” he continued, before Severus could say anything, “nor can Hawthorn, nor Black, nor Adalrico. You care too much about him. I am the only Marked one who stands a chance of bringing him out.”

Severus glared at him. Lucius returned his gaze calmly. Severus was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield; he had all but ripped apart the three Death Eaters keeping him from Potter. But his temper had its disadvantages. Now he obviously longed, wished, yearned for, the ability to tell Lucius to go to hell.

But he had no choice save to bow his head in a single curt nod.

“Father?”

Lucius glanced over his shoulder. Draco had not said a word since they rescued Potter and the Dark Lord vanished, which was as it should be. His voice would have broken, betrayed emotion too intense, so it was right that he keep silent. But his face and his eyes spoke for him, and Lucius did not like that at all. *Sooner or later, Draco will have to learn to control his emotions.*

“You can save him?” Draco asked.

Several dozen different things to say sprang to Lucius’s lips, among them warnings to Draco for doubting him. However, he decided that perhaps his son could be allowed this one—one—moment of doubt. He had not seen the curse before, he did not know how it worked, and since Severus and Lucius both did, it wasn’t information they’d included in their argument.

“I can,” he said.

Draco closed his eyes and looked away, shaking lightly. Lucius narrowed his eyes. *He should trust Potter to take care of himself more. I know that he took the curse because he trusted that he could survive it. He was right.*

The rest of the walk back to the school was boring enough—most of their uneasy alliance kept their mouths shut, and the people who talked, Hawthorn and Narcissa, said nothing interesting—that Lucius observed Connor Potter. He trudged nearly at the end of the line, his head down, obscuring the famous heart-shaped scar that supposedly proclaimed his defeat of the Dark Lord when a child. Lucius knew something more about that, now, and knew that Harry had been the one, not Connor, to deflect the Killing Curse.

The boy had done nothing in the battle, and now he must think that he was the reason Harry was lying pale and motionless in Severus’s arms, unable to see anything other than the world the curse had constructed for him, inside his own head.

Well, good. Lucius hoped that meant the boy would grow up. So far, Connor Potter had proven a disappointment. If he could become good enough to fight at Harry’s side, then he would serve a purpose. If he did not, then Lucius would do what he could to carefully, discreetly, separate Harry from his brother.

Our Potter needs to think of the future, not the past, and stop considering himself a sacrifice. Connor Potter could die, and the world would not stop turning. Harry Potter could die, and many things would become—uncomfortable.

Snape laid Harry gently in the bed in the hospital wing, only half-listening to Poppy Pomfrey’s chatter as she tried to ascertain what was wrong with him. She would find magical exhaustion, of course, and more ordinary fatigue from resisting the pain that

Voldemort had put him through. But the Mark Mirror Curse affected the mind, not the body, and not all of Poppy's spells would show her how to counter that. It was the Dark Lord's invention, his special plaything.

And Snape knew that Lucius was right, and he was the best candidate for bringing Harry out of it.

Snape smoothed Harry's hair away from his forehead, and stared at the angry red flare of the lightning bolt scar. He should have insisted that Harry shut that link with Occlumency long since. It was not worth it to keep it open, not when it cost him so much in pain and nightmares.

But Harry had been stubborn, and then angry with him, and Snape had not been able to insist.

Now, he would.

He thought about everything else. And in the end, he still endangered himself. Recklessly. Without caring what it would do to the rest of us. Snape felt the anger begin to burn, at least as hot as the pain that had flared through him when he saw Harry make the decision to put his body in front of his brother's once more. *That will end. I will make it end. And Regulus will help me.*

"How is he?"

Snape moved out of the way so that Regulus could approach the bed. He had sensed his old friend hovering in a corner of the hospital wing the moment they entered it. Regulus had felt no calling—Voldemort had obviously not thought it worthwhile to summon his still-loyal Death Eaters when he believed he had enough magic to take Harry—so he would have come to Hogwarts at the time they were supposed to set off for the tunnels and found no one there. Snape imagined him Apparating to London and racing frantically through the checkpoints, discovering them all gone. He shook his head. *Harry should think about what he has done to him, as well as to the rest of us—Draco, and I, and even his more distant allies.*

"He will recover," he said softly to Regulus. "You did not try to use your Mark to find and follow us. Good."

Regulus sighed and stared down at the Mark on his arm. Snape glared at it with more loathing than he reserved for his own. Regulus had revealed, as Snape had long suspected, that the Dark Lord had used it as a conduit for the pain he had suffered, before finally being Transfigured into a dog. He'd also left—traps in it, of a kind that Snape didn't understand, and which had nearly destroyed him when he tried to look at them last week. Regulus didn't dare try to use the Mark for anything, including finding Voldemort, unless he wanted to die.

Snape had had to spend some time conjuring and destroying delicate glass containers after Regulus left him last week. If those he cared for suffered pain that he could help, then he would help it. He hated, above all things, feeling helpless before a power greater than his own.

Perhaps there is something to the research Lucius has been doing after all, trying to find a way to destroy the Mark. Snape resolved to ask him later, and then looked up at the sound of a throat being politely cleared.

Lucius stood beside Harry's head, his own Dark Mark bared and gleaming. Poppy had gone—somewhere. Snape hoped in irritation that Lucius hadn't *Obliviated* her. Memory Charms often didn't interact well with minds tuned to medical magic. "The Dark Lord used the Mark Mirror Curse," he said. "This is a mental spell of his own devising, which constructs a reality for the victim so pleasant that he will not want to leave it. Someone who wears a Dark Mark and feels affection for the victim may pull him out. However, too much affection will lead to a desire not to smash apart that imagined reality, and the rescuer will become part of it. I believe I am the best candidate to bring Mr. Potter out of his coma without becoming trapped myself, as I will administer a short, sharp shock better than anyone in this room. Does anyone disagree?"

No one did, Snape saw, with a quick glance around. Even if Regulus had wanted to rescue Harry himself—and he could certainly argue for a superior knowledge of Harry's mind—his poisoned Mark would insure his death if he tried. Right now, he was staring at the floor and clenching his left arm as if he would like to tear it off.

Lucius nodded, pressed his Mark to Harry's left temple, and closed his eyes. His breathing halted for a moment. When it began once more, it matched Harry's. Snape felt the tickle of a mental sliding against his Occlumency shields, and knew that Lucius had passed out of his mind and into Harry's.

Narcissa came up to grasp her husband's hand. No one said anything, though Draco leaned on the edge of the bed, looking stricken, and most of Harry's allies watched with various expressions of interest. Regulus's voice seemed loud in the silence that

had fallen.

“When he comes back, I am going to give him *such* a talking-to.”

Snape gave Regulus a tight smirk. In this, as in so many other things fifteen years ago, they were in accord. Now that Snape could be sure this was the true Regulus, and not merely a sliced-off shard of Voldemort’s madness floating free in Harry’s head, he was fully prepared to welcome help in dealing with his recalcitrant charge.

Harry walked the halls of Hogwarts, and it was wonderful. People hurried past him on the way to class, calling to their friends and comparing notes hastily; Professor Merryweather had announced a simultaneous exam for all her Defense Against the Dark Arts classes that week, and no one felt ready. Hermione bumped into Harry and murmured an apology, not looking up from the book she read. A cloud of smoke further up the corridor indicated that Fred and George Weasley had discovered another item certain to be confiscated the moment Filch proved it existed.

Voices churned and swelled and talked about ordinary things, only slightly touched by the tension of the war. When someone did look ready to cry, they only had to glance up the hall, and then their gaze would alight on Connor Potter, calm and steady. He always had the right word to soothe fears or remind people that Voldemort wasn’t so formidable, not if a baby could survive him. Right now, he ruffled the hair of a first-year Ravenclaw and said something that made her smile shyly up at him.

And no one noticed Harry.

No one stared at him as if they expected him to help them, though they didn’t know how. No one glared with the disapproval that said they *knew* abuse charges should never have been filed against his parents and Dumbledore. No one wanted things of him that Harry didn’t know how to give, normal obedience and trust and belief. When people approached him, they conducted practical transactions, running on the rituals of promises and debts and obligations. Harry had gained several Dark pureblood families as allies for Connor through those bargains. The people who mattered knew who Harry was, and what they wanted of him, Harry knew how to give.

It was a bit of a shock to turn and see Lucius Malfoy standing in the middle of corridor, observing him. People brushed past him as if he weren’t there. Harry felt a frisson of unease glide up his spine. He inclined his head in a bow to Lucius, making it exactly the proper depth for a respected, if not trusted, ally. He danced well with Mr. Malfoy.

Yes, I do, he thought firmly, and beat away the memories that told him of times outside the dances, times when his life wasn’t so simple. The halls of Hogwarts wavered around him for a moment, then came back, strengthened by his will and desire to believe them real. Harry let out a little breath, and said, “Welcome, Mr. Malfoy. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Mr. Potter.” Lucius paused a moment, as if considering his next move, and Harry waited. *Entirely proper, for a dance*. “Harry.”

No. That’s not fair. He can’t expect this of me, not when I’ve got everything so nicely settled, when I don’t have to argue with anybody and I know I’m not failing them because they’re not asking me to be just like everyone else. Harry lowered his head and tensed. His magic soared up around him. He remembered, vaguely, that it had been stronger at one point. Memories of tearing webs and eating power and so on tried to present themselves to him. He shoved them away. *This* was the reality. He would make it be so.

Lucius hissed, as though he didn’t like the stones of Hogwarts firming under his feet. His eyes had taken on a hard sheen that Harry hated, because Lucius was *letting* him see that he was angry. That wasn’t part of a dance. Lucius was supposed to remain emotionless. “Harry. Stop this nonsense immediately. Voldemort has enslaved your will, but you are too intelligent to think this is real, since you have two contradictory sets of memories.”

“But I want this to be the real set,” Harry replied, and Hogwarts became more present around him. It was easier to lock the memories up in a closet and refuse to let them out. Connor’s laughter rang down the hall, and Harry could forget, if he wanted, that he’d ever heard his voice uncertain, pleading, forced to question his place and presence in the world.

Lucius leaned towards him. “So you would be a coward? You would leave my son to suffer, and your brother, and your guardian, and all those you profess to care about?”

Harry flinched and closed his eyes. “I can’t give them what they want,” he said. “I know that now. Everything I do is wrong. I

can't love Draco the way he deserves. No one's going to believe that I made the *decision* to risk my life for my brother's, instead of just leaping blindly into the path of the curse. If I go back, Snape and Regulus will be disappointed in me. I keep struggling to show people that I can learn, I can change, I can be something other than an abused child, and they keep shoving me back into the mold of what they think I am. I don't believe that I'm ever going to break that mold. They'll always see me as something other than what I really am, or they'll want something from me that they deserve but that I can't give them—like Draco. And they won't trust me to lead them, and that will cost lives. At least here I *know* exactly what I can do."

He hadn't known he was going to say all that until it poured out. Lucius said nothing. Harry opened his eyes at last, driven by intolerable curiosity, and saw Lucius staring at him thoughtfully.

"It is no wonder that the Dark Lord's spell chose this particular reality for you to inhabit," Lucius breathed. "The curse works with your deepest desires. And your deepest desire is for your life to be simple and uncomplicated, though you know it cannot be."

Harry scowled at him. "It can be as complicated as it likes. But I'm so sick and tired of failing everybody. Here, I know that I won't fail them."

"But you are," Lucius pointed out. "You deprive us of our best chance to fight the Dark Lord while you remain here."

"I no longer believe that I can be the leader you need," Harry said quietly. "The moment I risked my life for my brother, I realized how other people would see it—as a deliberate sacrifice. It wasn't, but try convincing *Snape* of that." Anger and bitterness choked his voice for a moment. He swallowed, and managed to continue. "And there are other decisions I'll never make that they want me to make. Adalrico, for example. He wanted me to use the Black Plague Curse. Others will want me to look aside as they make inroads in the Ministry, or discriminate against Muggleborns, or go right on enslaving and using magical creatures—and I never would. I never could. If I can't give them what they want, what kind of leader am I?"

Lucius blinked, once or twice. Then he said, "The art of leadership is not about surrendering your own desires for the good of others, Harry. It is about learning to *judge*. If you believe something to be a good decision, then you make it." He cocked his head to the side, and his eyes were bright with an amusement Harry had never seen them show. "I cannot imagine you compliant. I would not want to. If you feel that we are shoving you, pushing you against your will, then shove back."

"I don't want to impose my will on others—"

"And true leadership is also a very long way from that," Lucius said calmly. He was smiling now. "Wizards have long made those with Lord-level magic leaders. You have Lord-level magic. Very well. You cannot change that. Now make *yourself* a leader. No one has said that you must obey everything that another person asks of you. If Severus insults your principles, insult his back. He *hates* that. Balance my son's desires with your own. I know Draco. He would not want you to bed him merely because he desired it." Harry felt his face heat up, but Lucius might have been talking about applied Arithmancy versus the theoretical, from the calmness of his tone. "Dance this dizzy and complicated path, and if you chose to risk your life for your brother's by calculation rather than blind instinct, then come out of this dreamworld and tell them that. No one will know it, not for certain, if you remain here."

"You could go back and tell them," said Harry, with a last feeble hope.

Lucius's smile turned to a more familiar one, all teeth. "I will most certainly back you, if you come out."

"Sometimes, I don't like you," Harry told him, even as the imaginary Hogwarts around him began to fade.

Lucius laughed, a full-throated sound that Harry would have imagined Voldemort capable of making before Lucius. "I underestimated you, Harry," he murmured. "You would have come out on your own, I think. Even you know this is not real, and these objections are only the last feeble gasp of beliefs that you have almost put aside. You were hiding, but you would have put your head out of your shell."

Harry closed his eyes reluctantly. He was *tired*, he thought mutinously. He'd wanted to go somewhere nobody would bother him or demand normal, impossible things of him, and his mind had obliged.

But he didn't think he could have quite escaped the second set of memories or the knowledge that this was Voldemort's curse, and that his decision to choose Connor's life over his own meant nothing if he didn't come out of the coma the curse had put him in.

That doesn't mean I have to like Lucius, though.

Henrietta had to admit to a bit of disappointment when Malfoy opened his eyes and said, with a faint smile, "He will live. He is coming out of the coma, though it might take him some time to return to full consciousness."

Malfoy's son went white in the face and put his head down on the sheets next to Potter. Henrietta curled her lip. Edith would never behave so. She did what her mother asked of her, because she was better-trained than Malfoy obviously kept his heir.

She moved quietly towards the door of the hospital wing, not hurrying, not being obvious. Her eyes marked out, meanwhile, that Belville had tightened his lips and Burke looked sullen. Henrietta smiled. She already knew whom she would ask to aid her in her plan. It was convenient that the two most dissatisfied with Potter were also the weakest of the circle surrounding him. She could control vain Mortimer and dear Edward without a problem.

"Bulstrode."

Henrietta turned around and gave a pretty little nod to Charles Rosier-Henlin. "Greetings. Aren't you glad that Potter will live? I know that I am. My future is now more secure."

"I want what you took from the beach."

Henrietta widened her eyes, and then dropped them to the floor. She sighed as she pulled the knife with the dark hilt and blade of Light from her robe pocket. "I was only keeping it for him," she said meekly, as she handed it over to Rosier-Henlin.

He did not make even a pretense of believing her, but then, Henrietta hadn't tried to be very believable. As he accepted the blade, Henrietta waited, keeping her eyes down, wondering if he would ask...

"I will tell Potter about this. He deserves to know who—rescued—his knife for him."

Henrietta nodded, knowing Rosier-Henlin meant to warn Potter about her. That was quite all right. If he just didn't ask...

Rosier-Henlin turned away.

Triumph burst into Henrietta's heart, but she kept her face blank and calm as she asked Hawthorn Parkinson to convey her best wishes to Potter, and then turned and hurried out of the room. She had training in masks of serenity. She would not betray herself.

He only saw me pick up the one object, not the other.

Before she let herself get too excited, though, she made sure to pause in a remote corner of Hogwarts and consider the small curl of dark hair in her pocket. When she was satisfied it was Potter's, she went on her way, her expression grave and her step light.

She had been no slouch at Potions when she was a student. She knew how to brew Polyjuice.

Harry opened his eyes, slowly, and blinked. When he turned his head, he saw Snape sitting in a chair on the right side of the bed, and Regulus on the other. Harry tried to speak, but had a goblet of water held to his lips before he could. He rolled his eyes and obediently drank.

"Draco?" he whispered.

"Survived unwounded," Snape said smoothly. "He's sleeping right now. It's the middle of the night."

"And Connor?" Harry asked, knowing this was the calm before the storm, but holding fast to what Lucius had told him. *Lucius, of all people. I wonder if he was as surprised as I was to learn that he can actually think in moral terms?*

"Likewise, survived unwounded." That was Regulus, and his voice was a snarl that would have done Sirius credit. Harry rolled

his head to face him, knowing before he looked that Regulus would wear a stern expression. “We are going to have a little *talk* about your risk-taking, Harry, the moment you’re well enough to bear it,” he said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. *I know my motives for what I did. They might not believe in them, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t valid.* “I imagine we are,” he said.

Regulus sat back and frowned at him, as if unable to comprehend why Harry didn’t look guilty and terrified, but Harry closed his eyes before he could ask another question. The guilt was still there, of course—there never had been the terror that Regulus had imagined—but he believed he was, finally, ready to deal with it.

If I want them to treat me like an adult, I have to act like one. If I want them to have a real leader, I have to be one, and that doesn’t mean selfishly hiding in my mind, or adopting plans just because they want me to. If I want them to see what I really am, I have to show them that I’ll never be normal, and why.

Lucius was right, and that was the last gasp of those particular beliefs. I don’t think I could have abandoned the people who love me. Say I take them on trust for once, and believe that they really do love me unconditionally. Then they can bear a few disappointments, like my arguing with them instead of just submitting.

This should be fun.

~*~*~*

Interlude: Wax Wings and Missing Muggles

September 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

Really, you disappoint me again. You had soared so close to perfection, too, so close to the sun. Of course, the sun melts wax wings, and your wings are nothing but wax, as you have shown in this latest silly escapade. Are you burned? I hope so. One hopes for a burn when a child has done a silly thing. Were I there, I would hold your hand in the fire myself until you learned.

Did I contact you about this attack? No. Did you listen to the warning that I did issue, about my Lord feeding on Muggleborn children? No.

When will you overcome your pride and listen to your elders and betters, Harry? Had you done so, then you would have listened to my silence and known this was a trap—and not bothered going. As it is, my Lord managed to capture several dozen Muggles with his sirens, luring them into the water and the clutch of the pretty creatures. The Obliviators are hard at work, trying to contain knowledge of the magical world and come up with a cover story for that many missing Muggles.

Many missing Muggles. I can use alliteration when I want to, do you see? One day I may hope to rank myself with the greatest poets.

What does he want the Muggles for? Well, at one time I might have told you, but now I won’t. You need to fly on your own again for a time, and learn to read the silence. What can a Dark Lord gain from Muggles? Ask yourself that, Harry, and you will have the answer.

You have been luckier than you deserve, escaping with your life like that. And my Lord has been unluckier than he deserves. I can say that my life is quite interesting, with this contest between the two of you, but it does remain ultimately disappointing that you will not listen to good advice.

Do not fly so close to the sun, or I will come and hold your hand in the fire myself, to teach you a lesson. Children must learn their place.

In the game,
Evan Rosier.

~*~*~*

Intermission: Vengeance and Trauma

Lucius stroked the top of the small cage sitting on the library desk as he read the message he'd received from the Ministry over again.

September 22nd, 1995

Dear Mr. Malfoy:

I of course understand your concern that new laws impacting on the activities of Dark wizards might be made without your input and consent. Since your family has traditionally been considered Dark, these laws must be expected to lay a greater burden on you than proclaimed Light families such as Gloryflower and Opalline. I am flattered that you have taken the trouble to contact me about it. It is true that I come from a Dark pureblooded family on my mother's side, and though I myself have not Declared, I have a sentimental regard for many of the old dances. If you would like to visit my office on the sixteenth of October, then I would be happy to explain the new laws to you, and why I believe the Dark families have nothing to worry about.

*Yours sincerely,
Auror Edmund Wilmot.*

Lucius curled his lip slightly. *Wilmot* was no pureblooded name that he was familiar with. More than likely, this Auror was a halfblood, his father perhaps even a Muggle. And he was probably lying about his mother coming from a Dark pureblooded family. Lucius didn't know any Dark pureblooded witch who would lower herself by marrying like that.

Then, of course, he had to remember that he was related by marriage to Andromeda Black Tonks, who had done that exact thing.

Lucius shook his head briskly and folded the letter. He had already written Wilmot back, accepting the invitation. He trusted Wilmot—who was Nott's contact on the cells, the one who would arrange to get Lucius to Lily and James Potter—to take care of things from there. If anyone questioned him about Lucius's presence, that would be Wilmot's fault, and not Lucius's.

Lucius stroked the top of the cage again, then crouched down to look in through the close-set bars. One of the insects inside jumped hungrily forward at him, only to crash against the bars and fall back. Lucius chuckled. He caught a glimpse of long black legs, seven of them, and fluttering wings, dark but deeply sheened with green, and barbed pincers. He tried to imagine the pain that would result when one of those insects dug into a healthy, living body.

He found that he could not imagine the pain.

That was all right. James Potter would imagine it soon enough.

Lucius rose and walked across the library to select a book from the shelf. He had the outline of the curse that he intended to use for Lily Potter all ready. However, the curse was eminently flexible, and Lucius could place other spells within it, all of which would affect her mind at intervals that he controlled. There might be an incantation perfect for expressing his displeasure that he hadn't yet found, or had forgotten, or had dismissed as not worthy of his notice and should reconsider.

He opened the book, flipped through a few pages, and began reading. Ten minutes later, he sat up, staring intently at the words.

Yes. Yes. That would be appropriate, and I do not believe that I left it this long.

Of course, Lucius mused, he might have encountered this spell before he hit on the idea of the flexible curse, and discounted it. Usually, *Neco Identidem* could not be cast in concert with other spells; it required time and mental space in which to work. With the curses all joined in a round, however, that problem was eliminated. Lucius sat back to read again about the effects of the curse, a warm glow growing in his stomach.

It will never be enough for what they have done, but it will be enough for my share of the vengeance.

The door of the library opened, and Narcissa entered. Lucius looked up at her and raised an eyebrow when he realized that she wore red robes, rather than her more usual black or dark green.

"A special occasion?" he asked.

“I do not wish the blood to show.” Narcissa smoothed the red robes down once, then turned and showed him the side view. “What do you think? Do I look suitably terrifying? An angel of vengeance?”

“A very *phoenix* of vengeance, my dear,” Lucius assured her, and had the satisfaction of hearing Narcissa laugh softly.

“Very good.” Narcissa came forward and bent to kiss him, deliberately not touching any part of his body with her hands. Lucius took care of that, winding his right hand in her hair and pulling her head back. Narcissa watched him with a peaceful smile. She knew that she could die on her hunt, and Lucius knew it. When he bent and kissed her, he put all that bloody wisdom in his kiss. Narcissa had her eyes shut when he pulled back.

“I wish I could stay,” she murmured. “But my sister will be *so* disappointed if I don’t keep our lunch date.”

Lucius breathed out over her lips and let her go. Narcissa moved to the door, and paused a moment to look at him. If she died, she would leave him a memory of herself in glory and strength, and that, Lucius thought as he stared into her eyes, blue shining against the pale skin of her face, was more than enough.

She departed, then, and Lucius turned back to the book. When he was sure he fully understood *Neco Identidem*, he rose and went to write a letter to an acquaintance whom he kept employed as a fact-hound. It was time to find out which Dark pureblood family on the Continent, or in Britain for that matter, had had a son who went to Durmstrang, was tall, and had cracked his collarbone at some point in his life.

The letter was soon written, and Lucius went back to his library shelves. His hand hovered over the books that he had used to choose spells for vengeance on the Potters, but moved on a few moments later. The whole point of his revenge on Harry’s parents was that it should be inconspicuous, so that no one would ever learn how much they had suffered.

When punishing the family of the man who had tried to kill his wife, he need not use the same finesse.

And Lucius wanted blood.

Narcissa Apparated once she was outside the Malfoy Manor wards, and landed in a place familiar to her from scattered days of childhood and one long summer, when her parents had simultaneously decided that they wanted to take their daughters away from home but didn’t want to risk Wayhouse’s odd sense of humor. Narcissa felt her face relax into a smile. She hadn’t grown up by the sea, but she loved it, and the scent of salt air and the roar of waves worked as a balm on her. She stood enjoying them for a moment before she walked towards the house.

Cobley-by-the-Sea was the largest of the Black family estates, except for Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. The house rambled along high cliffs on the coast of Cornwall, with the sea leaping and roaring beneath. Magic gleamed on the windows and the doors, spreading out in subtle webs that made most Muggles think Cobley was just part of the cliff. Narcissa would have had a hard time seeing it if she wasn’t a Black. Distrustful people, her ancestors, to be so wary of other wizards and witches.

Narcissa wasn’t surprised that Bellatrix had been sighted here. Cobley was a dreaming house, old and rich in additions, and it had long been family rumor that there were entrances into it which the wards didn’t comprehend. Bellatrix would look to find one of those entrances. She might be days at it, but the treasures inside Cobley—not weapons, but treasures—made the effort worthwhile.

Tertian Brown had been the one to write to her and inform Narcissa that he’d seen her sister nearby on one of his herb-gathering expeditions. Narcissa was still impressed that he’d had the courage to defy his formidable wife, Henrietta Bulstrode, and start a secret correspondence with her. And it *must* be secret, or Henrietta would have made sure to trade the information to Narcissa for a higher price.

Narcissa let the Atlantic spray soak her hair. For a moment, she stood on the edge of the cliff and relived a moment in her childhood when she might almost have believed that everything was all right, that death and madness didn’t lie in the future. Andromeda had conjured a rope ladder for them to descend the cliffs and look for gulls’ eggs. They’d climbed down, and seen a bright shape soaring overhead that Narcissa had always believed, privately, was a phoenix. Even Bella had gone silent with awe. The instant lingered in Narcissa’s mind as a perfect mingling of sea and fire, wind and stone.

She heard the expected movement behind her a moment later. Narcissa smiled as she whirled around, her wand securely in her

hand. She had known that standing on the edge of the cliff like that, clearly outlined against the horizon, would draw Bella. Her sister always struck at weakness.

Or perceived weakness, in this case, because Narcissa was ready with her conjured bonds, and Bellatrix went down a moment later, shrieking and spitting.

Narcissa walked towards her, biting her lip thoughtfully. She'd sworn to make Bella suffer, and so she would. However, Narcissa wanted to claim another permanent price from her, the way that last time she'd deprived Bella of her left hand. What should it be, though? It had to be something crippling, painful, and symbolic.

Oh, yes. I know.

Narcissa smiled, and crouched down beside her sister. Bella whipped her head around and tried to bite her. Narcissa didn't move, since the teeth snapped an inch short of her fingers. She'd judged the slack in the ropes very carefully.

"You don't have a greeting for your Cissy?" she asked, affecting hurt. "You don't think that I deserve a polite word and a kiss? We haven't seen each other in months, after all."

"Come near me," Bella said, voice as dark as her eyes, "and I will give you a kiss that will eat straight through your cheeks."

"Mother would have liked you to offer a real kiss," said Narcissa, as she drew a silver knife from her pocket. She'd found the knife in Grimmauld Place, and, after a few experiments, revealed the enchantment. The blade cut only human flesh when it was spoken to, and so was largely useless outside of torture, but since that was what Narcissa had planned for today, it would make a useful helper. She whispered a Levitation Charm, and the knife rose from her hand, vibrating slightly. "On the other hand, she's dead, and I suppose you don't have to worry any longer about disappointing her, Bella. But you do have to worry about disappointing me, and I am *very* much alive."

"Not for much longer," Bella spat. "My Lord will destroy you, Cissy. You should have bowed to him when you had the chance. He *might* have let you live after multiple *Crucios*. And now he won't! He won't, and it's all your fault! You've doomed yourself!" She gave a good imitation of her old cackle.

"How disappointing," Narcissa said, and began to walk in a circle around her sister, tracing her wand lazily above Bella's body. The knife followed her motions, and then sank, cutting through her sister's robes to expose her belly. "I did so want to be in the good graces of a raving madman with a face like a snake's and eyes like a rat's. Tell me, Bella, does he bed you? Is he good at eating you? I suppose that would be one advantage to his having no nose, at least."

Bella promptly began screaming incoherently and trying to bite her again. Narcissa had been waiting for that. She spoke a soft plea to the hovering knife.

It stabbed down, twisting through one fold of flesh and then out again. Bella's screams acquired a tinge of pain, but only a tinge. Narcissa knew she was too far gone in madness to react to the cutting as others would have.

That was all right. Narcissa could continue cutting her for a long time. She admired the sheen of blood on Bella's pale skin, and then whispered, "Up." The knife rose and spun, twisted and sank, sliced open Bella's belly and then cut up to her stomach. All the time, Bella screamed, and Narcissa knew she would have tried to grab her ankle and harm her, if her sister were in reach.

Narcissa never intended to be. The red robes were just a precaution. She kept moving, and the knife did the work for her, inflicting such wounds as Bella could never hope to survive if Narcissa weren't carrying potions to heal her and replenish her blood.

And finally, Narcissa did hear her sister scream as Harry must have screamed that night in the graveyard. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her mouth hang open in a devastating, silent cry. The knife kept her conscious.

Narcissa stepped cautiously close and poured the proper potions into her mouth. Bella choked and gagged and swallowed. Her wounds closed. Her body twitched as it made new blood to replace the lost liquid. Narcissa smiled and stepped back. She resumed her circle.

The knife resumed its work, slicing and severing and cutting. Narcissa had not yet decided whether she wanted to leave scars. She might, she thought. Harry had enough scars on the stump of his left hand and on his mind, soul, and emotions. A pity that

Narcissa couldn't be sure she would scar her sister the same way by this treatment. Even when they were children, she had to make Bella physically suffer if she wanted to hurt her. She only reacted to taunts and insults by getting angry.

After three more healings, Narcissa thought a small dent was made in the threefold debt Bellatrix owed Harry, and called the knife back to her pocket with a small wave of her wand. She whispered a thanks. The knife stopped vibrating and again became an ordinary blade. Narcissa turned to face Bella.

Her sister took some moments to recover her breath and her lucidity—Narcissa would not say “sanity”—enough to notice her. Then she sneered. “What’s the matter, Cissy? Don’t you have the guts to kill me?”

“You have to stay alive and suffer,” said Narcissa calmly. “That’s the only way I’ll keep the vow I swore. I do feel sorry for you, though, Bella. It must not be very fulfilling following a man whose plans crumble when he faces a fifteen-year-old boy. And he really *isn't* any good in bed, is he? Or you wouldn’t be so frustrated.”

As expected, that made Bella shriek and lunge against her bonds. This time, though, she wasn't crying out in pain. Narcissa hoped to get some information from her before she made Bella pay the permanent price she had in mind.

Bella said a great many things that were of no use or no moment, mostly praising Lord Voldemort. Then she said, “And it’s not as though you’ll stop him from using Woodhouse or his old home all he likes, you know! You won’t! You can’t! His plans are too grand!”

Narcissa smiled. She had no idea where Woodhouse or “his old home” were, but Lucius might. And, even better, Bella didn't seem to realize she'd given any important information away.

“Thank you, Bella,” she said sweetly, and then lifted her wand. Curiosity filled her like the scent of mint. She'd always wanted to try this spell, since the Slytherin girls' rooms were full of the rumor of it during her Hogwarts years, but it wasn't the kind of thing one practiced casually. Someone always knew someone else who had done it, a cousin's sister's friend or the like. It would be interesting to have first-hand experience of it. “*Abrumpo mamillas!*”

Bella let out a long, knife-edged wail of agony. Narcissa was grateful that she had made the knife cut her robes loose, or she would not have had the pleasure of seeing what was happening now—Bella's breasts shriveling and turning soft and spongy, sagging on her chest into mushroom-like lumps. They broke off her chest a moment later, and rolled down her sides in clouds of dust. Bella went on screaming. Narcissa chuckled. That was worth waiting to see. Quick, of course, but it has such a permanent effect.

“Stay safe, Bella,” she said. “And give my regards to your Lord. I suspect that even if you do like him bedding you, he might not like you so much anymore.”

She waved cheerfully to her sister, and then walked away to Apparate back to the Manor. There was still the chance that Bellatrix could cause grief and pain, of course—though Narcissa hardly thought she would do so today—but there was always that chance with her bitch of a sister; there was that chance with any Death Eater. And Narcissa might die in their next encounter. There was always that risk, too.

But it was the price she paid for the vengeance she wanted, consuming Bella piece by piece, maiming her steadily, until she had paid threefold for what she had done to Harry. The old vows of revenge were solemn things, not to be entered into lightly, and Narcissa had known what she was doing when she accepted this one.

When she has paid threefold, then she may die. But that will not be for some time yet.

“Remus? Can I talk to you a minute?”

Remus lifted his head and turned to face Connor, blinking. He'd been awake, of course—no chance of sleeping, not when he'd heard about Harry's participation in the battle and slow recovery, and then had to talk softly to several Gryffindors frightened by the rumors of the war—but he was still surprised that his godson had come to talk to him this late at night.

He understood a moment later, when he saw Connor's face. Humiliation and anger and grief chased themselves across his expression, and his scent, thick with emotion, challenged the constant smell of the torches. Remus knew Connor could not have

slept while feeling like that.

He opened his arms, and Connor bolted across the room with a little sob and caught him close. Remus stroked his hair, and moved gently towards the back of his office. Minerva had given him a comfortable room, with several padded chairs where Gryffindors could collapse and yell or sob out their grief and their complaints to their Head of House. It was furnished in red and gold, which colors seemed to calm most of his charges down.

Perhaps they would even have calmed Connor down, Remus thought sadly, if the boy had lifted his head from his godfather's chest to see them. He kept his face buried in cloth, though, clutching Remus's robes and crying. They sat down together. Remus kept up a constant soft murmur, mixing encouraging words with questions about what was wrong.

He thought he could guess, of course. Minerva had got the story from Severus, and told him. Both Harry and Connor had gone to the battle on the beach, from which You-Know-Who was controlling sirens who had swum up the rivers miles away, especially in London, and lured Muggles into the water. The *Daily Prophet* had a story about it already, temporarily displacing the stories of the abuse case from the front page. Connor had not been in London to see helpless men, women, and children fall prey to the sirens' compelling songs, but he had seen curses hurled at close range. He had seen death. He had seen his brother take a curse for him.

The wonder, Remus thought as his hands stroked down Connor's back, *is that he lasted this long before breaking*. It was almost ten at night.

Finally, the tears stopped, and Connor lifted his face, gone red and blotchy. Remus already had a cloth ready; he'd laid in quite a supply of them after his first day talking to first-years who missed their homes and their mums. Connor wiped at his eyes, blew his nose, and gave a crooked smile.

"I suppose that you think I'm silly, huh?" he croaked, as he moved away and collapsed into another chair.

"Not at all," said Remus quietly. His heart ached. Oh, of course Connor had known troubles before—even if they weren't as deep and long-lasting as Harry's problems, that didn't mean they weren't important—but never on this scale. The parents he had loved and the Headmaster he had once trusted and revered were in prison. He'd spent the summer apart from his brother, getting battle training from the elder Weasleys. He was struggling through his first bond with a girlfriend whom, Remus knew, he genuinely liked but who didn't like Harry much. Today he'd had the war press itself viciously on his awareness, and he'd seen just what Harry was prepared to do for him.

Connor was Connor, untrained to face trouble the way Harry did, by pushing it behind a silent mask and channeling his energy and his magic into helping others. It was not surprising that he needed comfort.

And thank Merlin, Remus found himself thinking, as he studied Connor and saw the lines of grief starting to carve the immaturity off him. *Thank Merlin. I love Harry, but I would not wish his training on his brother. Harry lives scarred. He will always carry those scars. Connor might weep now and then, but the tear tracks won't burn themselves as deep.*

"I just felt useless, you know?"

Remus fixed his attention on Connor again, and not on his past. "Why?" he asked softly.

"I—I thought I could do something if I went along." Connor wiped at his eyes again and then shrugged, crumpling the cloth in his fist. "Use my compulsion, use the spells that Bill and Mr. Weasley taught me, fight the Death Eaters, *something*. But I only managed to get off a few spells, and those were mostly hexes and jinxes that bounced off the Death Eaters' Shield Charms. And then I stepped up behind Harry and said his name like a fool, because I was worried about him, and Voldemort tried to fire a spell at me, and Harry got in the way." Connor stared at the cloth, now knotted around both his hands. "I want to hug Harry. And I want to slap him."

Remus laughed. "That's a common reaction around Harry, Connor. And I don't think you were a fool. You survived a battle against Death Eaters. It isn't many people *my* age, let alone yours, who can say that."

"But I got Harry hurt."

Remus sighed. What he might be about to say was harsh, perhaps, but it would free Connor of self-blame, and that was all to the good at this point. "No, Connor. Lily got Harry hurt. I do think that Harry did the best he could with limited time to spare, but she

was the one who trained those sacrificial instincts into him. He thinks the best way he can protect you is by endangering his own safety, so that's what he does."

"I wish he wouldn't," said Connor, a harsh expression on his face "It's *annoying*."

"Yes, it is," said Remus.

"There are times I wish she wouldn't have existed," Connor went on, staring at his feet. "And there are times I'm jealous of Harry, you know? Because I know his life is hard, but he never falters for long. He just keeps going. He does what he has to do to survive, and he also helps other people. I could never do that, even though I'm supposed to." He made a frustrated noise. "And then I see times like today, and I'm so grateful I'm not him that I can't breathe." He stared up from under his fringe at Remus. "Does that make any sense? I'm not sure it makes any sense."

"It does," said Remus. "I don't think you need to be ashamed of either emotion, Connor. Harry is—someone I can admire, someone I love deeply, but not someone I would wish anyone else to grow up to be. He's paid too high a price for what he's achieved. I think he might experience joys the rest of us are never going to know, but he has pains the rest of us are never going to know, too. The way he got his training—" Remus shook his head. If he thought for too long about the abuse, even now, his anger rose, and the wolf with it. "I would rather you were you," he told Connor. "I would rather that Harry was more like you than the other way around."

Connor was quiet for a few moments, before he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I can see that." He scuffed with his foot at the floor for a second, then said, "I just wonder if I should be more like Harry sometimes. I'm supposed to be a hero, you know? And I don't feel like one."

Remus leaned forward and hugged him. Connor stiffened slightly in surprise, but Remus didn't let him go, though the movement had been impulsive.

"In just over two years," he said softly into Connor's ear, "you've survived possession by You-Know-Who, seen one of your adopted uncles die in front of you, had to revise or reverse truths you've known most of your life, and seen your parents accused of abuse and Harry emerge as someone completely different than who you thought he was. You've come out of that alive, with your sanity intact. I don't know a better beginning for a hero, Connor."

Connor's hands came up and clutched tightly at his shoulders. Remus thought he might cry again for a moment, but he didn't, just sat there holding him. When he drew back at last, his smile was shy, but there.

"Thanks, Remus," he said softly. "I'll remember that. And now I've got to go back to Parvati, or she'll wonder where I got to."

He stood and left. Remus watched him go, some of his own pain gradually melting into peace.

They've both had to suffer, and it isn't fair. But they're both still alive. They both have the chance to change, and to live.

"Draco?"

Draco blinked and lifted his head, groaning as a crick in his neck warned him not to turn too fast. He rubbed it gently as he looked up at Harry. He stared witlessly before realizing Harry was awake.

Draco felt his tongue freeze for a moment; there were so many things he wanted to say that he choked trying to say them all. As it turned out, that was probably a wise thing. Harry smiled slightly and reached out to clasp his hand.

"I was hoping you would be alone with me when I woke up," Harry said quietly. "There's something I want to tell you. And—" He hesitated, then shrugged and forced the words out as though through a barrier in his throat. "I don't want to say it to anyone else, yet."

Draco felt as though he had stepped into sunlight. There had been a time when he would have adored this sign that Harry valued him above other people. As it was, he knew Harry was capable of giving more, and he wanted that, but this was still pretty damn nice.

“Well?” he prompted, when Harry sat in silence and stared at the far wall of the hospital wing.

Harry spoke without looking at him. His hand, though, remained steady, rubbing small, comforting circles on Draco’s knuckles. “Did your father explain to you what Voldemort’s curse did?”

“Created a reality so pleasant that you wouldn’t want to leave it,” said Draco at once. “Yes.” He swallowed. He could imagine dozens of realities, or hundreds, better than the one Harry lived with every day. He had been terrified that his father wouldn’t be able to bring Harry out, though he hadn’t dared show that.

“Did he say what mine was?” And now those green eyes were locked on him, and Draco didn’t feel much more comfortable than he would have confronted with a Hungarian Horntail. He shook his head.

Harry closed his eyes. “Good. That’s what I wanted to tell you. I thought about keeping it secret, but—well. You keep saying you love me. I think it’s about time I trusted that, instead of automatically assuming you’ll be disappointed in what I think or feel.”

Draco didn’t speak. To speak would have been to mess this up. He took Harry’s hand in both of his, forcing it to stop its rubbing, and squeezed as hard as he could. Harry tilted his head towards him, and smiled slightly.

“I dreamed about a Hogwarts where I barely existed,” Harry said softly. “The war was still happening, but other students went to Connor for reassurance. And he bore it well. He could comfort them without even thinking about it. They came to me when they needed more specific, concrete help, but he was their emotional guide and guardian. The only set of rules I had to remember was the pureblood rituals. When someone walked away after I finished helping him, I knew he wasn’t going to demand that I help him in any other way.

“I was happy. Merlin, Draco, I was *so* happy. You have no idea. I defended and served and protected people, and they smiled at me—and then I slipped away, and they ignored me, or didn’t remember that I’d ever been there. No one stared at me. That’s what I want, that kind of reality. No *Prophet* articles, no expectations I can’t fulfill, no one interested in seeing my soul, because why would they be interested? Just ordinariness for me. That’s what I want,” Harry repeated, his voice sinking at the end.

Draco wondered what the hell to say. He felt only revulsion at the thought, and wanted to ask questions. Hadn’t he been in the dream-Hogwarts with Harry? Hadn’t Harry thought that if someone else wanted to see his soul, they should be able to do that? Didn’t Harry have any ambition at all, even for gratitude? How could he *lack* a thirst to be acknowledged?

Harry took a deep breath, and his next words came out in a rush, like the unfolding of wings. “That’s what I want. But I know it’s not what I have.” He opened his eyes, and Draco wondered what to make of his smile, because it seemed so unnatural, given what he’d just been talking about. “And it’s silly to give up everything I have, everything *you* ’ve given me, for the sake of a fantasy that can’t come to pass. I know what I am now—or, well, at least I know it better than I did. I chose to put my life in danger for Connor’s, it wasn’t a blind sacrifice, but a few minutes after I woke up in the dream, I knew how you’d view it. That’s why I couldn’t stay there. I’ve accepted this reality into my blood and bone. Merlin only knows why I’ve ended up in this position, but the least I can do is try to understand it, not run from it, and try not to let the staring and the seeing flay me from the inside.”

He leaned forward, holding Draco’s gaze. “And you’ve said that you love me without the need for me to give something in return. You’ve said that you won’t stop loving me because I make a mistake, or because I show that I’m less than perfect. It’s about time that I trusted you to mean that, isn’t it? So I told you about the dream. I knew you might not like it, but I wanted you to know. And I love you. I wanted you to know that, too.”

Harry’s breath was coming a bit faster, and Draco realized he was terrified, though struggling with all his might not to show it. And why wouldn’t he be? Pureblood rituals didn’t apply here, and Harry, unlike most other children, hadn’t been taught any other way of functioning. He had trusted Draco enough to leap off a cliff, but he couldn’t be completely sure that there was a bottom to it.

Draco showed him there was by leaning forward and kissing him fiercely. Their kisses to this point had been gentle, chaste, often because Draco worried that he would frighten Harry away if he moved too quickly. Not now. They’d been comrades in battle, they’d both survived, and Harry had shown Draco a proof of love that wasn’t a sacrifice. That called for a fierce celebration.

Harry started, but from the way he relaxed a moment later, Draco thought it was from surprise, not fear. Then he made a noise in the back of his throat that might have been a muffled *ah!*, as though he’d suddenly grasped the solution to a complicated Arithmancy problem, and leaned into the kiss, giving as good as he got. Draco found himself grinning. Harry would hardly be content to sit there like some sort of passive maiden from the old history songs.

Harry did draw back a few moments later, and then shook his head and settled himself. “Thank you,” he said.

Draco finally found something to say that didn’t sound stupid. “I wish you had more ambition, Harry, but that’s not the same thing as hating you for dreaming that dream.”

Harry snorted with laughter. “I know that now. Can you believe how long it took me to figure it out?”

Draco stamped out a flare of anger towards the people whose fault that had been. Instead, he murmured, as he watched Harry’s eyelids droop again, “Madam Pomfrey said you should stay here a while, for the spell exhaustion if nothing else. Passing that much magic through your body wore you out. Go to sleep. Do you want me to wake you at any particular time?”

“If you’re still here when Snape and Regulus both come in,” murmured Harry, his words slurring. “I have some things to say to them.”

Draco promptly made a resolve to stay awake for *that*, if he could. The ring of steel in Harry’s voice promised an interesting confrontation.

He waited, listening to Harry’s breathing until he was certainly asleep. Then Draco leaned back, closed his eyes, and, for the first time in seventeen hours, let himself really believe that Harry’s newfound ability to plan was not just a fluke, but the sign of a deeper, more profound, beautiful, and welcomed change.

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

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Razor Claws of Consequence

Harry woke to a light touch on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, and met Snape’s gaze, harsh and unyielding.

Of course it is, Harry thought, and braced himself. He knew at least part of the confrontation that was coming. Snape, from the way he spoke in a quiet, assured voice with anger beneath the surface, didn’t.

“Harry. It’s Friday afternoon now, and Madam Pomfrey reassures me you have slept enough to be on the road to health. We have much to discuss about your behavior in the battle,” said Snape, and sounded as if he believed it—and, more to the point, believed that all the discussion would be on his side. Harry felt his own anger stretch steely wings and uncoil within him. He sat up so that he leaned against the pillows, and squarely met Snape’s gaze. He was a Legilimens. He would be able to see Harry’s emotions, and read the truth of them.

Snape sat back slightly, staring at him. Harry heard a movement off to the side, and turned to see Regulus in the chair on the other side of the bed. He was just shutting his mouth with a faint click, as if he’d had it open to comment on the interplay between Harry and Snape.

“I know what you saw my gesture to defend Connor as,” said Harry. They could start out with rationality and reason, he supposed, though they wouldn’t stay there. “I realized it the moment the curse took me. I can tell you it wasn’t what it might have looked like. I reasoned out the best course. I took the curse because the loss of my brother would have killed me. And he would have been lost, wouldn’t he? No Death Eater cares enough about him to go into his mind and pull him out of a dream-world.” He’d awoken again before dawn, before Snape and Regulus came, and pulled the rest of the information on the Mark Mirror Curse from Draco.

“It was still a sacrificial gesture,” said Snape. “You could have cast a shield that would have deflected the curse, Harry—“

“When I was so exhausted? Without knowing what the curse was, and how strong I would have to make the shield?”

“You are making excuses,” Snape hissed. “You *prefer* to use your body as a shield. You think of your own flesh, your own will, your own *life*, as sacrifices to protect your brother.”

“You’re wrong,” said Harry, a little startled at how cool his own voice was. But then, he *had* known what would happen. “I did work out what might have happened, and decided to take the risk. There were other elements to the decision. I’m magically stronger than Connor. I thought I could likely survive it. He couldn’t.”

“I cannot believe that, Harry,” Regulus said softly. “I spent time in your head, remember? I know how strong your impulses towards sacrifice are—probably stronger than you know yourself. Even when you do have time to work out what you’re going to do, you choose that course rather than any other.”

“Snape can tell if I’m lying,” said Harry, with a jerk of his head at his guardian. “Have him look.”

“I would see that you are telling the truth if you believe it to be so, Harry.” Snape’s voice was infuriatingly calm. *Bastard probably had a chance to recover while I was talking to Regulus*, Harry thought, and turned around again, determined not to give Snape any more chances like that. “For what it’s worth, I agree with Regulus. You made the best decision you thought you could, but it is still not a decision that you should have made. It was a sacrifice.”

Harry ground his teeth, and used the noise to calm himself. *If I’m violent on my teeth, I don’t need to be violent on Regulus and Snape*. “It was not. I calculated the risks, I told you. And if I had conjured a shield and the curse struck Connor anyway, then what would you say? That I’d done the right thing? That wouldn’t have compensated for the loss of my brother.”

“We are not talking about hypothetical situations here, Harry.” Snape’s voice sounded like grinding ice again, much to Harry’s pleasure. “We are talking about what actually happened.”

“Except that you want to replace what actually happened with one of your hypothetical situations,” Harry shot back. “Either I should have done something different, or I actually *did* something different than what I’m saying. You distrust my motives constantly, you know—you think every step I take and every breath I draw comes from some warping my mind took from my abuse. It’s about time that that stopped. I am capable of trust. Ask Draco. And I’m getting sick and tired of not receiving any of it in return.”

“Harry, what are you talking about?” Regulus’s voice was soft and bewildered. Harry didn’t look at him, though, not wanting to back down from his silent staring contest with Snape. “Of course we trust you. But it is true that you refused to acknowledge your abuse for a long, long time. Can you blame us for thinking it *does* drive more of your behavior?”

“So, fine. Think it.” Harry heard how clipped his own voice was becoming, and didn’t care. He’d started out with the rational explanation, and made no headway. He would have to try the harsher road. “But then I’ll tell you otherwise. And you’ll go right on thinking it does, won’t you? That’s what I mean by distrust. It’s like being thought mad no matter what sense I speak. *I am not an invalid*. If I say that I’m thinking clearly, then be so good as to accept that.”

“Do you think you would still have done as you did if not for your training?” Snape asked, obviously trying to keep back a snap.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I love my brother. And he’s not the only one I’d risk my life for, not any more. If that curse was heading for you, then I would have done the same thing.”

“That is not what I want to hear.” Snape leaned towards him and spoke softly and intensely. “I want to hear that you value your own life enough to think of another course.”

“My life is *mine*,” said Harry. “Yes, I’m trying to think of other things that I might accomplish with it. No, I don’t want to mindlessly give it up to save an ant colony. Yes, I know that it might leave other people around me floundering if I died. But I will not, I *cannot*, consider that my life is more important than someone else’s in the way you mean. I was fairly certain I’d survive that curse. And if I ever have to make a similar decision, and it’s between damage to me and near-certain death for someone else, then I’d do the same thing.”

Snape shook his head. “You cannot even conceive how much more important you are than your brother, can you?” he whispered.

Harry felt as though someone had slapped him across the face with a fistful of ice shards. He drew back from Snape and turned away, facing Regulus again. He didn’t really see him, though. His mind was speaking the words over and over in his head, in numb shock.

I know that he cares more for me than Connor. I know that he doesn’t really like my brother. But to say that I’m more important than he is, that my life will always matter more than his does...

And this is the thinking he wants me to share.

“Harry?” Regulus said softly.

Harry shook himself and drew his walls up again with a snap. He had survived Snape's being a git before. He could do the same thing now. And it only gave a stronger push to the half-formed suspicion he'd carried before, that, no matter what his objective need for a guardian was, Snape was not the best choice for the role. He'd sacrificed much to protect Harry, yes, but he could not rule Harry's affections, or his mind, or his thoughts.

"Now I know where you stand," he told Snape, keeping his voice flat and smooth. "Thank you for confirming that."

Snape looked at him oddly. Harry supposed he had no idea what the hell he'd just done. To him, the statement of Harry and Connor's respective values would be a normal part of his thinking, a small statement no more worthy of notice than many other truths that circulated in his mind every day.

To Harry, it symbolized everything that was wrong between them. He breathed through a tight throat, and supposed he should make an attempt to *tell* Snape that. Keeping silent out of pride or shame was a bad thing. He had seen that enough in his life. Sirius had died because of it. His parents and Dumbledore had sent Peter to Azkaban because they could not admit to something they had done—something they had even thought was *right*, but did not believe they could chance anyone else discovering. And Harry wouldn't allow Snape to go away under a misapprehension.

"I'll never think the way you do," he told Snape. "My brother is as important to me as my own safety and well-being are. You and Draco and Regulus are all important." *Yes, damn it, even you*, he thought, as he watched a brief spasm of emotion cross Snape's face. "But I'm not *more* important. And now you're going to try to punish me, aren't you, for what you think of as sacrificing my life." He didn't make it a question, because he didn't need to.

Snape's face tightened. "Yes," he said. "But not just for that, Harry. This is a sign of deeper problems that need to be corrected."

Harry felt his fury sink cold claws into his brain. *I knew it. The way I think is wrong. The way I am is wrong. Snape wants to change my mind about things. Well, he can't. My actions are one thing. When I endanger other people the way I endangered Draco when I dragged him along in my attack on Voldemort's mind, then I'm wrong. That was stupid. But the way I think is mine. And I know that I made the decision to protect Connor based on the right principles. I know it, even if the two of them won't believe it.*

He did shoot a glance at Regulus, to see if he believed differently from Snape. But the half-wry, half-sad smile on his lips as he gazed at Harry told the truth. He believed the same things. He thought that because he'd spent time in Harry's mind, he understood what was "wrong," what needed to be "corrected."

Harry shook his head.

"What?" Snape asked, with a frown at him.

"You don't have the right to punish me," said Harry softly. "I know *exactly* why I did what I did, whether you believe me or not. I know that I've changed and healed—not all the way, but enough that I'm on the right road, and I can continue pulling myself forward. I don't need detention or whatever it is that you've got planned for me."

"Detention for a start," said Snape. "But it is time when you can speak to me, Harry. You're right. I don't understand what possible motives you could have had for this action beyond self-sacrifice. But if you speak to me, convince me, then you might yet settle my mind and make me admit that you're right." His face was calm again, damn him, while Harry's fury made it feel as though Voldemort's magic were passing through him once more.

"Why should I have to convince you?" Harry glanced over his shoulder at Regulus. "Why should I have to convince either one of you? I've told you the truth. I know my own mind, I think. I was the only one in my head when I made that decision. I've told you my reasoning, and you haven't accepted it. I don't see why I should spend more time telling you things you refuse to accept." He turned away from Snape and pulled back the blankets on his bed. He still felt tired, but no more than he would after a hard day of Quidditch practice. He was going back to the Slytherin common room.

Regulus caught his arm. "Harry, we want to understand," he said.

"I've told you the truth. Understand that." Harry pulled his arm free.

"We wish to heal you because we care about you." Snape's voice was frustrated. "I've seen the memories that Dumbledore had of

your training, Harry. I know what he did to you. I know—“

“Did it ever occur to you,” said Harry, turning around and throwing the words like knives so that Snape would *leave him alone, damn it*, “that I’m more than those memories, that I’m more than just an abused child? I could never have recovered as far as I have if that’s all there was to my mind. I have my own will, and my own ability to change. I am going to be a leader in this war, and a vates, and many, many other things than a victim. And yet, a victim is all you see, every time you look at me. I’m sick of it.”

“You acknowledge the other things,” said Snape, his voice turning harsh. “You do not accept that you were ever a victim, Harry. Have you even spoken to anyone about the abuse you endured, except for your interviews with Madam Shiverwood?”

“You see what happens when I try?” Harry gestured at him. “You assume that’s all there is to me. I try to distinguish between the motives my mother gave me and the ones I chose, and you discount my choice entirely.”

“Harry—“

He wasn’t in the mood to listen to Snape any more. Harry slipped out of the bed and left the hospital wing. His emotions were still cold, very far from the boiling point. It felt rather as though a chill, white mist had filled him, one through which he could see clearly and feel glittering, icicle-edged emotions.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry turned quickly. Charles Rosier-Henlin, who’d been leaning against the wall, straightened from his slouch and nodded to him, then drew a knife. Harry brought up defensive magic before he realized that the knife was his familiar one, with the dark hilt and the blade made of Light, and that Charles was holding it towards him with the hilt first.

“Henrietta Bulstrode found this on the beach after the battle,” said Charles, his voice entirely neutral. “She wanted it returned to you.”

Harry smiled and accepted the knife, sliding it into his belt. “And she didn’t have help in the returning?”

Charles had either a very faint smile or the trick of smiling with his eyes and not his lips, Harry thought. “I wouldn’t know, I’m sure.” Then he cocked his head. “I was thinking that one of our major problems in this battle is communication. I dislike only former Death Eaters being able to find the man I’ve sworn myself to follow. I did create a spell some time ago which might solve the problem. I’ve never spread it around, because I didn’t want anyone taking advantage of it. I use it to communicate with my sons at Durmstrang. Would it benefit you to know this spell?”

“Enormously,” said Harry. “What can I do in return—“

“Remain as you are,” said Charles fiercely, even as he drew his wand. “Care for your brother. I know why you did that, and it is a motive I can only approve of. Family is important. Be savage, and be fierce, and be free-willed. Do not become a Lord.”

Harry let his lips quirk. “I think I can manage that. What is the spell?”

Charles nodded. “It needs to be cast on both of us at first,” he said. “After that, you need only to speak the spell with my name in it and it will work.” He reached out and tapped Harry’s left wrist carefully with his wand. Harry watched his face closely, but he showed no revulsion at the sight of the stump. “*Adoro braccchio de Harry Potter!*”

Harry blinked as an odd tingling ran up his arm. It didn’t feel quite like anything he’d sensed before, unless it was a slow lightning bolt. He watched as Charles stepped back and touched his own wrist, this time murmuring the spell with both of their names in it. Then Charles walked around the corner of the hall, leaving Harry feeling a bit silly, just standing outside the hospital wing. He could hear Snape and Regulus arguing quietly inside, and guessed it was the reason that one of them hadn’t yet come after him.

A sound of phoenix song came from just above his left wrist. Harry jumped, and realized Charles hadn’t told him what to do when this happened. He cleared his throat tentatively, and asked, “Mr. Rosier-Henlin?”

“I hear you, Mr. Potter.” Charles’s voice was deep and self-assured, and seemed to emerge from just above his left wrist. Harry stared at his stump in fascination. “The bond between us works now. When you cast the spell with my name, I will be able to hear

you, at a distance of up to several hundred miles.”

Harry nodded, then realized Charles couldn't see him, and said, “I understand. This is fascinating. Where did you come up with it?”

“I studied Muggles for a while,” said Charles, even as another slow lightning bolt traveled up Harry's arm and his voice only emerged from around the corner. He stepped back into sight again, looking quite pleased with himself. “I knew that anything a Muggle could do, a wizard could do better, and Muggles have a way of communicating with each other across distances, called telephones. I created a spell that could do the same thing.”

Harry hesitated.

“You may share the spell with others now,” said Charles, correctly interpreting his hesitation, “as long as you believe that they won't use it against our alliance. I am quite anxious to win this war, Mr. Potter.” This time, the smile that showed up only in his eyes was colder. “I lost a nephew to the Dark Lord. My sons are *not* going to serve him, or to grow up in a world he rules.”

Harry nodded. “If you don't mind my asking—well, I thought only powerful wizards could create spells of their own, Mr. Rosier-Henlin, and I didn't feel your strength plunging that deep.”

“Concealment spells,” said Charles comfortably. “No one alive but my wife and sons knows how strong I am. And it will remain that way for a time, Mr. Potter. I trust you with very many things, but family secrets are private and should remain that way.” He paused, his eyes never looking away from Harry's. “I am sorry that yours have been spread all over the papers.”

Harry grimaced. “Not as sorry as I have been. It should have been handled privately.”

“I have no doubt of that,” said Charles, and then bowed. “I will see you again, Mr. Potter. Speak to me every time you have need of something I can do.” He strode up the hallway before Harry could think to ask him another question.

Perhaps it was just as well, because Regulus chose that moment to emerge from the hospital wing, and lean against the wall near the doors. He waited for Harry to acknowledge him. Harry didn't. He started on his way towards the Slytherin common room again, wondering absently where Argutus was. Probably out exploring, he thought. He would have lain still long enough to be boring to the Omen snake, and he was sure Draco would have told him if Argutus had died in the battle.

“Harry.”

Reluctantly, Harry pulled up and let Regulus walk beside him. It was late Friday afternoon, from the angle of the light, and he thought most of the students would be in their common rooms or on the way to dinner, but that didn't mean that he wanted everyone to see Regulus chasing after him. He cast a measured glance up at him. “Well?”

“You realize that both Severus and I care deeply for you?” Regulus scanned his face.

“Yes.” That only made this all the harder, in Harry's opinion. It would have been easy to ignore Regulus and Snape if they were condescending people only doing this for the good of some abstract abused child, or if Snape were acting out of his grudge against James, as Harry was convinced had been the case when he was first Sorted into Slytherin. As it was, he had to listen to them even when he was coldly furious with them, and give them a fair hearing. That didn't mean that he was going to change his mind, or admit that he had been wrong to do what he had done for Connor.

“And I think that you do need to heal more than you've allowed yourself,” Regulus continued softly. “You said that you'd do the same thing again, if it was a choice between damage for yourself and near-certain death for someone else. But what about situations that aren't as desperate? Do you think that you could change your mind about *them*, and act in different ways?”

“I would try,” said Harry. “But you and Snape would still think that I'm acting from stupid motives.”

“Harry, no.” Regulus gripped his shoulders and sank down in front of him. His eyes were gentle, but not mocking. “It's true that I don't believe you. I've seen how deep the wounds go, remember, even in your rebuilt mind. But I could come to believe you. And you are certainly allowed to go on reaching for love, for comfort, for the people who love you, outside of battle. That's the reason I wanted to make you my heir—to give you a place, places, to belong, and show you how much I care for you.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “And I don't need houses or money as a proof of that emotion, Regulus. That's why I'm asking you to

find another heir. I don't want them."

"Why not?" Regulus persisted.

"I just don't."

"Tell me why."

Harry shook his head, thinking that if he spoke what he honestly felt, he would hurt Regulus—and then he remembered that he was supposed to trust them and speak what he felt, wasn't he? He let out a windy sigh between clenched teeth. "I feel like they're an encumbrance," he said. "I think most possessions are, unless they can actually help me in battle or they mean something to both me and the person who gave them."

"This fits that last category, Harry."

"But it's too *heavy*." Harry didn't know a better word than that, though it was obvious from Regulus's expression that he didn't understand. "I get uneasy with a few birthday gifts, Regulus. I never cared that much about becoming heir of Lux Aeterna, even. I always assumed James would make Connor his heir. I just don't care. They're not things I value."

"And you think that—"

"I wouldn't make a good heir if I don't value the houses and money and possessions." Harry made an attempt to soften his voice as he saw Regulus's stricken expression. "I value the *offer* more than I can express, Regulus. But that's not what's needed to take care of a house like Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. And you do have other people who could accept it, or you might meet someone who could. What you want to give me deserves better care than I would give it."

"You value them, and yet you don't value them." Regulus shook his head. "There's a contradiction in your thinking there, Harry."

"I value them for other people. Not for me."

"You think you don't deserve them?" Regulus cocked his head. "Yes, I understand what you mean about heaviness now. I felt some of that on your birthday. You kept wanting to push the gifts back. You were embarrassed about receiving them at all. You don't think you deserve them, do you?"

Harry hissed between his teeth. "This is silly."

"I don't think so. Not when I still want to make you my heir, Harry."

"I won't accept it."

"I'll make the will." Regulus looked absurdly calm as he rose to his feet. "What you do with them when they pass to you is your affair."

"And if I chose to let Bellatrix have them?"

Regulus gave him a patient look.

"All right, so I wouldn't really do that," Harry admitted, flushing. "And it wasn't even a good lie. But I don't want them."

"Someday, I'll help you figure out why," said Regulus. "I'm not like Severus, Harry, and that's the reason that he sent me out after you. I can be more patient with you, and perhaps I can even convince him that we do need to listen to you instead of just demanding explanations we'll dismiss. Not to mention that I have a better sense of humor, and am *far* more devilishly handsome." He struck a pose that made Harry's breath unexpectedly catch; for a moment, Sirius was alive all over again.

"I meant what I said," said Harry, when he could speak. "All of it. About not wanting the houses and the money, and about not wanting to explain to either of you about my motives, when all you do is misinterpret them."

Regulus nodded, with another patient look. "And we're both going to be here, Harry, to argue and yell and give you houses, until you realize that we meant it when we said we loved you."

“I *know* that—“

But Regulus had ruffled his hair and was setting off up the hall again. Harry scowled at his back, and walked towards the Slytherin common room nursing his wounded dignity.

They still think that I'm suffering consequences of the abuse. Regulus is nicer about it, that's all. And any promise I make to think things over isn't going to be good enough, because they'll still believe that my real motives come from abuse. Harry ground his teeth, and his magic rose and sparked about him until he forced it back under his skin. *I'll just have to show them that they don't, by showing them how well I'm healing, and that it isn't due to stupid little talks with Madam Shiverwood.*

He reached the door, entered the common room, and almost immediately drew any number of curious glances as he moved across it towards his bedroom. Harry ignored the glances. Yes, so he had gone off and battled the Dark Lord. Big fucking deal. Right now, he had something more important in mind.

He entered the bedroom, and glanced around to find Blaise gone. *Good. Now, is Draco here, or—*

A rustle in the curtains of Draco's bed answered that question, and he poked his head out. At once, a smile grew on his face. “Harry! I didn't know you were awake, or I would have come to the hospital wing myself.”

“That's all right,” said Harry. “You had to go to classes, didn't you?”

Draco immediately flopped back on the bed and folded his arms behind his head, snorting. “Yeah. Can you believe it? I want to know why Transfiguration is more important than sitting with you.”

“Snape and Regulus were there,” Harry said.

Draco turned his head at once, but said nothing. His eyes were intense, though, inviting Harry to talk more.

“It went badly,” Harry added, drawing towards the bed. He felt a faint stir of nervousness, given what he was about to ask, but pushed it away. “They simply refused to accept that I really *did* make a conscious decision, rather than saying, ‘Oh, goody, a curse!’ and jumping in front of it.”

Draco snickered in spite of himself. Harry smiled, and knew it was a fierce smile. “They still think I'm a victim,” he said. “And that's all they seem to see. At least, it's the source they trace all my actions back to right now.” He cocked his head at Draco. “And I know that's not true, because I'm making efforts to overcome my training. And right now I'm irritated, and I'd like to show them up, and I'd like you to touch me, please.”

Draco's mouth fell open. Harry sat down on the bed beside him and took his glasses off, leaning over to drop them on Draco's trunk. “I know it's not *necessarily* the best motivation,” he added. “But I'd like it. Please.”

“No need to ask three times,” said Draco, his voice gone a little hoarse, and then moved behind him. Harry closed his eyes and waited, trying to relax his shoulders from the tense hunch they'd automatically adopted.

Draco's hands came down on his back. Harry sighed. This didn't feel much different than Madam Pomfrey applying salves to soothe bruises from a Quidditch injury. He thought he could—

And then Draco slipped his hands beneath Harry's shirt, touching bare skin, and began to run them up and down.

Harry shivered.

“I know my hands aren't *that* cold,” Draco murmured.

“Not cold,” said Harry, and closed his eyes, trying to hold on to the burst of courage that had driven him here in the first place. He moved a bit, unsure if he wanted to get away or get closer. Draco settled the matter by slipping one hand free, putting his left arm around Harry's chest, and drawing him backwards.

Harry gave a gasp as he abruptly rested against Draco, and tilted his head back. Draco leaned over him, eyes a clear gray, bright with unmistakable pleasure. *He really seems to like touching me,* Harry thought, and didn't know which emotion was making his

head so clouded. *But I know something he would like more.*

He raised his hand and ran it over Draco's face, then into his hair, stroking awkwardly; this wasn't a good position for him to reach much more than the back of Draco's neck. Draco gave a great huffing breath and went still for just a moment. Harry supposed it did feel good.

He himself wasn't sure what he felt as Draco's fingers worked over his back. It was all right, not cold, warm, and it made his head cloudy. He wasn't sure if it actually felt good—

And then it did, it felt too good, and ingrained instincts made Harry gasp and roll away, pulling free of Draco's arms entirely. "Sorry," he murmured into Draco's sheets, wondering if he should be more apprehensive. He closed his eyes and panted for a moment, willing the pleasure and the misty feeling to go away.

Draco hooked his arms around Harry's waist, in a gesture too old and familiar to be panicking. "That was all right," he said calmly. "Not nearly as much as I wanted, but an excellent start."

Harry swallowed. *It was all right. He's not angry. He said he'd push, but he's not going to push me off a cliff.*

He was able to sit up and rest his head on Draco's shoulder, before he drew away and said, "What was it like today? Did the others cheer you as a hero of the battle?"

"Half of them don't think that we battled Voldemort," said Draco at once, face flooding with disgust. "Oh, most of the Slytherins know, but there are a bunch of Ravenclaws, with that Parsons bint in the middle of them, declaring that we couldn't have, or we wouldn't have come back alive. I *told* you to let me hex her, Harry. We—"

Harry relaxed by degrees. It was all right. Draco didn't scorn Harry for being afraid of pleasure the way his mother had trained him to be. It was silly to think he would have. Snape and Regulus might be impossible at the moment, but Draco wasn't, and Harry was a little giddy with the emotions that flooded him at that realization.

And, oddly, that made him all the more determined to shatter this stupid training.

I'm not going to let my mother win. She did this to me, but it serves no purpose anymore, and I don't want it, and Draco doesn't want it. So I'm going to overcome it, and show Draco that I enjoy touching him as much as I enjoy talking to him or fighting beside him. Then I'll have won. We'll have won. So there.

~*~*~*~*