

The Heir to the House of Prince Part 3 - The Last Necromancer

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/43358683) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/43358683>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death
Categories:	F/F , F/M , M/M , Multi
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Theodore Nott/Harry Potter , Harry Potter & Severus Snape , Remus Lupin & Harry Potter , Remus Lupin/Severus Snape
Additional Tags:	Severitus , Severus Snape is Harry Potter's Parent , Severus Snape Has a Heart , Protective Severus Snape , Severus Snape is Lord Prince , Abused Severus Snape , Abused Harry Potter , Abusive Dursley Family (Harry Potter) , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Implied/Referenced Suicide , Implied/Referenced Suicide attempt , Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con , Implied/Referenced Torture , Implied/Referenced Self-Harm , Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism , Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence , Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault , Suicidal Thoughts , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Depression , References to Depression , Slytherin Harry Potter , Heir of Slytherin Harry Potter , Parselmouth Harry Potter , Parselmouths & Parseltongue (Harry Potter) , Gryffindor/Slytherin Inter-House Relationships , Body Horror , Canon-Typical Violence , Violence , Blood and Injury , Implied Childhood Sexual Abuse , Attempted Sexual Assault , Abuse of Authority , Triggers , War
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of The Heir to the House of Prince
Stats:	Published: 2022-12-01 Updated: 2024-02-14 Words: 252,951 Chapters: 29/?

The Heir to the House of Prince Part 3 - The Last Necromancer

by [elph13](#)

Summary

"And they shall not return from Charon's gate
and tread the mortal paths again
except for the children of Persephone
the twilight flames of nekros
who mark the manteia of the daughters of Nyx.
Beware those who bring the Moirai."
- The Necromancer Prophecy of Ursula Shipton

"And his power shall return in England's hour of need, to rid the land of darkness again."
- The prophecy of Merlin

"Then Morgana Le Fey took from Death's own stallions a hair of finest silver and the stallions could be seen no more upon the field of battle, only to the warriors who had seen the steps of Death as she passed. The Fae Queen took from her people a cut of the wood of their Elders and it bled with their tears and berries were formed. Then from the body of Mryddin where he lay, his life spent upon the field of battle, they took a bone from his arm that had borne the sword of the lake. Each part they gave to Death and she fashioned for Morgana Le Fey a weapon of great power."
- Marina Ollivander's Account of the death of Merlin.

You're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry.

Notes

We're back!
Chapters will be updating on Tuesday and Thursday on Ao3.

A WARNING:

I have endeavoured to be as clear as I can in the tagging of this fic as to its content. If you are carrying burdens of particular traumas that you do not want to engage with in fiction, then please do reference them.

This series, at its heart, is about one thing: Living with trauma. Living with trauma means living with triggers. This means the content is, in itself, both triggering to the characters who live it but also, potentially triggering for readers. As a person living with trauma, I understand as well as anyone its slippery nature; triggers may may surprise or horrify me by popping up in unexpected places, they might brush me past, barely touching, or I may simply

acknowledge that the world is, indeed, a vast and sometimes disturbing place and only I can decide how best I navigate it on my own journey.

Consequently, I cannot give you further guidance as to how reading this story may impact you. This third part of the larger story is, in many ways, the darkest and most complex of the three parts I have published on Ao3, as it delves deeper into questions of power and naturally, consent. To reassure you, I borrow from one of my literary inspirations, Neil Gaiman, and his introduction to his book 'Trigger Warnings:'

"There are things in this book, as in life, that might upset you. There is death and pain in here, tears and discomfort, violence of all kinds, cruelty, even abuse. There is kindness, too, I hope, sometimes. Even a handful of happy endings. (Few stories end unhappily for all participants, after all.)"

I promise you nothing more in the reading of this book than a walk through the valley of the shadow of death and eventually, a handful of happy endings.

To my dear readers who have been waiting for those happy endings since I first began posting, thank you for sticking with me. I hope you enjoy these trials and tribulations and eventual triumphs.

A NOTE FOR IMPATIENT READER BEANS:

If you are sensitive to cliffhangers, if you are a person who does not enjoy suspense or does not count patience among your many blessings, then I will be as clear as possible: Wait until the book is complete to read it.

Any writer would be a fool to give herself a deadline (we do love the whooshing sound they make when they go past us) but I can say I intend to have finished in a year.

Let's begin again.

This time: A meeting at Kings Cross.

Next time: Blaise's plan.

Officially

Dear Harry,

I am back in London. I heard what happened with Dumbledore. I will meet you at the train tomorrow, to make sure you get on it. Remus says he'll still pick you up tomorrow morning from the Burrow. If you have need of me, letters floored to Lord Weasley's and Miss Tonks' residence will find me. Travel safe.

Magnus

Mags,

Can't wait.

Bill and Tonks, is it? Smooth.

See you tomorrow.

Love, Harry

Dear Harry,

I'm back at Spinners End. I'll pick you up early tomorrow from the Burrow. I thought we could spend the morning in muggle London before Kings Cross.

I've missed you.

Love,

Remus.

Dear Rems,

That sounds wicked. Let's go to the place the twins told me about with the crazy hot chocolates. It's fine to have hot chocolate for breakfast, I checked with Mrs Weasley. (Especially after a full moon.)

Missed you too,

Love you,

Harry.

Dear Ron and Harry,

I can't wait to see you both on the train tomorrow! Mum and I travelled up to Rome today and I'm going to be coming by portkey with Zabini and his Mum tomorrow morning. Mum's a bit anxious about me going back to school. She's also got really attached to Crooks over the summer, so I'm leaving him in France with them so she feels a bit better. I can always bring Crooks back with me at Christmas if I need to, but he really likes the new house in France. Dad says he's a mouser. It feels weird not to be at the Burrow with you all, but I think everything is going to be a bit weird this year.

Give my love to everyone,

See you tomorrow

Hermione

Mi,

Can you bring my football from the Castello? Remus didn't bring it back from Rome this summer. Also, Ron says Crookshanks isn't a mouser - he's a rat catcher!

Charlie says hi and Ginny says she's still got your denim shorts so she'll bring them tomorrow, (in case you were wondering where they were). Percy says nothing. Kingsley got him a job in Whitehall with the Prime Minister, kind of like an Order of Phoenix plant in the muggle government, which is good because it keeps him out of the house all the time. When he's in it, he's full of snide remarks about me. (Some things never change!)

Mrs Weasley made fudge. We've got a box packed for you in my trunk.

Can't wait to see you either. You're right. It's going to be a weird year but I'm gonna at least try to lie low.

Love you,

Harry

(And Ron!)

Dear Ward,

Please find attached your adoption paperwork.

May your vengeance be swift as eagles,

Griphook

Travel well tomorrow. If you need to use your ring, do so.

S.S.

— — — —

How is the Greengrass house?

I had a meeting with Lord Greengrass this evening.

Oh yeah?

It was good. He has made it clear that when I assume my Lordship he expects me to follow his lead in the Wizengamot if he is to continue hiding the truth of my guardianship.

Bold move, Lord Greengrass

I find I respect him more for his directness

Anything in the Greengrass library on the Elder wand?

Nothing. But we can look when we get back to Hogwarts.

Good idea.

Any more random visitations from Death and discussions of old Necromancer families?

None. Just dreams.

How are you sleeping?

I'll sleep better with you.

Me too.

See you on the train.

Yes. Make sure you get on it.

I promise.

— — — —

“Tell me, daughters of the house of Black, is this use of the magic ... usual?”

Severus stares up at the Dark Lord from his position kneeling on the floor. The Dark Lord has expanded Lucius’ memory of the Wizengamot from his pensive and now Severus is staring up at a misty version of his son, glowing with white light and expansive wings made of magic.

“I could wield it so, my Lord, I could wield it for you,” Bellatrix immediately gabbles and Severus resists the urge to roll his eyes at this predictable comment. Once again, he has been unnecessarily drawn into a Malfoy/Black family meeting with the Dark Lord. It is the night before the Hogwarts term begins and Severus should be finishing his lesson plan or, God forbid, actually getting some fucking sleep. He is grateful at least that Draco has not been forced to present himself. Although Severus imagines that lying awake upstairs wondering if his parents are going to survive until the morning cannot make for a restful preparation for a return to school.

“Silence, Bella!” When the Dark Lord kicks Bellatrix Severus is absurdly glad. After all, they’ve been kneeling on the damn floor for fucking hours and every time Bellatrix speaks, it only ensures the meeting gets longer.

“Daughter of the house of Black,” The Dark Lord snarls and points his wand at Narcissa. Beside him on the floor, Severus feels Lucius stiffen. “Speak.”

Bellatrix has curled on her side. Lucius has taken several flaying curses and a cruciatus and Severus has been under the cruciatus once. Narcissa has been untouched so far. Severus will not look at her, and will not show worry or concern as he knows that will only encourage the Dark Lord. He prays that Lucius has held onto enough of his blood to think clearly. If Lucius begs for Narcissa’s life, she will surely suffer much worse.

“It is not usual,” Narcissa keeps her voice remarkably calm as she stares at the end of the Dark Lord’s wand. “But it has been spoken of. The raven magic.”

“Speak of this magic more,” the Dark Lord demands. Severus doesn’t need to look up at his face to understand the heavy excitement in his Lord’s voice.

“It belongs to Black Lords,” Narcissa says. “It is when the family magic takes the forms of the ravens.”

“The ravens of the Black Prince!” Bellatrix gasps out, scrambling back up to her knees. Severus winces internally at those words and instantly imagines them written in his son’s clumsy handwriting in the front of his old potions book: *Property of the Half-Blood Prince and the Black Prince*. Then Severus spears the thought through the heart with an icicle and buries it under snow inside his mindscape. “They are deathly and vicious and powerful beyond measure and they could be yours, my Lord, if I could take the Black Magic back from the boy, if I could reclaim it for you!”

“Silence,” the Dark Lord waves his wand and Bellatrix’s mouth is sealed. Possibly her nose, too, because she sounds like she’s suffocating and Severus doesn’t care.

“I have no need to take it from him. Not if I have *him*. ” Severus looks at the Dark Lord’s face. It is rapturous and horribly close to the silvery face of his son, made of wisps from the pensieve. Severus doesn’t want to think of Harrison like this, the frown between his dark eyebrows, eyes almost black behind his Potter glasses, wings at his back as the Dark Lord circles him like a shark. Instead, Severus briefly thinks of Harrison asleep, in his bed at the Burrow watched over by Molly. *Safe. He is safe right now.*

“Potter will never turn on Dumbledore,” Lucius says quietly. “The child is in his pocket.”

“Oh Lucius, you forget I have tasted the rage of his mind,” the Dark Lord chuckles. “You do not know the disdain he harbours for Albus.”

With a merry wave of his wand, Bellatrix can breathe again and is gasping on the floor.

“Potter will not turn!” She rasps out, trembling violently. Severus whispers fervently that she would pass out. Or die. Both are acceptable. “When I fought him in the Ministry he was hesitant! He does not understand pain, he does not *want* to harm, his crucio was *feeble!*”

Severus tries not to jerk with surprise and quickly buries his own anxiety under the snow inside his mind. Still, this is something Harrison has never told him. *Harrison cast an unforgivable curse.*

“Oh, but that can be taught and power has its own taste,” the Dark Lord smiles at the silvery, still version of Harrison. “This magic is wild and ... *offensive*. It bursts from him when he is fierce and angry and soon, he will want to hurt others with it, to control them. Then it is only a matter of time, Severus.”

“My Lord?”

“You will be his defence teacher, will you not?” The Dark Lord’s wand drifts lazily unto Severus’ face. He stares at its tip and tries to imagine, briefly, how many pairs of eyes have seen their last in its wake. “Teach him to wield it.”

“The boy has never been teachable,” Severus says with his usual scorn because it is expected of him and predictably, the Dark Lord smirks happily.

“Ah, my patient brewer, such high standards you have for your students,” the Dark Lord’s hand is cold and clammy when it presses against Severus’ cheek. “He does not need instruction, Severus, he needs *inciting*. Anger him. Enrage him.”

“You believe his lack of control shall be his downfall?”

Severus tries to ignore how soft, how crooning the Dark Lord’s tone has become. It makes Severus want to vomit and rage so he pours icy water on his thoughts and lets them freeze.

“My Harry has always been emotional,” the Dark Lord whispers. “Bring this magic out of him, Severus. It shall not be difficult, I am sure.”

Severus doesn't flinch as the Dark Lord presses his nails into Severus' cheeks. He takes it for what it is. A warning.

"I am yours in all things," Severus says quietly.

"Faithful servant, you were ever thus," the Dark Lord chuckles, withdrawing his hand. "Now, I am sure that Lord Malfoy and Lady Black have the preparations to make for their son. After all, we are so invested in Draco's education."

Lucius hates that the Dark Lord no longer calls Narcissa Lady Malfoy, Severus can see it in his clenched fists.

"Thank you, my Lord," Lucius says evenly.

"You are merciful," Narcissa says. Only someone who knows the inner workings of Narcissa's mind as clearly as Severus would think this comment was anything other than blatant sarcasm. He has always admired her ability to say exactly what she thinks without anyone ever realising it.

"I am indeed," the Dark Lord grabs Bellatrix by the hair. "Come, Bella."

He lifts his wand and the two of them are gone, no doubt to Urquart Castle to make MacNair's and the disabled Rabastan's Lestrangle's night unbearable. Promptly, Lucius slumps to the side. Sighing, Narcissa pulls potions out of her sleeve.

"Blood replenisher," she murmurs, pressing it to his lips. "Illithid's bane."

Severus rises unsteadily to his knees and watches impassively as Lucius groans, colour returning to his face as his wife casts quick healing charms over his still-bleeding arms. His eyes find Severus and he reaches out a hand. Severus forces himself not to hesitate. He offers his own hand and hauls Lucius to his feet. Severus checks his pupils and presses his fingers against his neck, a show of medical concern when he has no genuine concern to give.

"You are responsive and your blood pressure is rising but still low," he says. "Rest."

"Yes," Lucius closes his eyes. There is blood in his silver hair. "Draco goes to school tomorrow."

"I will watch him," Severus says. Lucius nods, wearing exhaustion on his scarred face. Severus knows that it is not Narcissa's no doubt flawlessly prepared creams that are keeping the mark so livid on Lucius' pale face. Lucius has a plan for his scar, no doubt.

"I go to bed," Lucius opens his eyes briefly to look at Severus then slowly at Narcissa. "You?"

It is as blatant an invitation as Lucius seems able to make in his weakened state. Severus tries not to remember the first time the invitation was issued, the curt words (*May I fuck you?*) and the fast, unyielding hands. He also desperately tries not to think of Lupin, asking for a warning if Severus were ever to find himself forced into Lucius' bed again.

“I must return to Hogwarts,” Severus looks away from them both.

“I will see Severus out,” Narcissa says.

“Of course you will.” Clearly, losing a couple of litres of blood hasn’t stopped Lucius’ sneering tone. “If you must *see* to Severus, I will only ask that you do not sleep elsewhere tonight. Draco will expect you to be here in the morning to say farewell.”

Lucius must be feeling better if he is able to scornfully suggest Narcissa always sees to Severus’ needs first. Especially since Lucius always literally and figuratively came first in any arrangement they ever had. Severus turns back, expecting to see Narcissa’s rage at the suggestion that she would do anything other than put her child first and foremost in everything but instead, she is stroking Lucius’ hair with an unreadable expression.

“Go and rest, husband, in your own bed,” she says quietly. “It is rare that you have an opportunity to sleep alone without my sister.”

Severus feels a swell of adoration for Narcissa, as clear and rising as a sparkling wave in the ocean. Her gentleness, her acerbic tongue, it has always been magnificent. Lucius says nothing. He twists his face to kiss his wife’s hand and then walks stiffly towards the door. When he has walked through it, Severus casts a wordless *muffliato* around them and Narcissa waves her wand in her custom rune sequence until they are encased in silence.

“Lucius believes in our affair, I see,” he says. Narcissa nods, her eyes distant as she looks at the silvery impression of Harrison.

“There is nothing more likely to blind him to our true purposes than his fixation that we are keeping a secret from him,” she says quietly.

“He wishes to bed me.”

“Undoubtedly,” Narcissa does not look distressed by it. “You should not allow it.”

“Because you are distressed by who he beds?” Severus winces and reaches inside his own robes for a pain reliever, taking a quick sip.

“I am distressed by the notion that he could use you again, my darling boy. I stopped caring who Lucius takes to bed as soon as he climbed into the Dark Lord’s.”

Narcissa pulls a small pot of cream out of the pocket of her black skirt and dips a finger into it, reaching up to smooth an orange paste over the marks of the Dark Lord’s fingernails. Severus doesn’t question her answer but he doesn’t think that it is quite true. After all, every Death Eater knows that if the Dark Lord tells you to strip, you strip or you die. Severus thinks it has more to do with Bellatrix.

“Lucius has always been obsessed with a rival,” Severus mutters. Narcissa’s fingers are still but then she nods slowly.

“The Dark Lord is changed in this body in this version of himself,” she says. “Before his death, Bellatrix was unparalleled in his affections but now ...”

“Now he wants to see them fight for it,” Severus finishes for her. “And Lucius cannot resist a fight.”

“He has always loved fighting with my family.”

Severus thinks that is perhaps more telling than anything else. The House of Black is ancient and proud and scorned the upstart House of Malfoy for generations until the Dark Lord’s cause united Orion and Abraxas. There is probably pleasure for Lucius in the slow subjugation of that family under the Dark Lord and now, below Lucius, if he can keep up with Bellatrix. *He has outlived the two sons of the House of Black and fucked the two daughters.* Severus cannot imagine the resentment that curdles in Narcissa in the dark of the night for the desolation of her sisters and cousins. *Yet she pledged fealty to my son.*

“Thank you,” Severus says, feeling the balm heal the cuts on his cheekbone. Narcissa nods distractedly, but her eyes are once again fixed on the silvery impression of Harrison.

“It was not Harrison’s place to stand for those children,” Narcissa whispers. Her eyes are wet. “When did we decide that he would stand for them? He is only a child himself.”

“Yes he is, yet those children did not seek help from those older and wiser, they sought help from him,” Severus sighs heavily. “You can protest it all you want but the truth is, the children of the Wizengamot do not trust their elders to protect them.”

“It is not right,” Narcissa shakes her head. “None of this is right when a child is forced to seek protection from a more powerful child.”

“No, it is not,” Severus is suddenly enraged. “Who’s idea was it to call the heirs without their guardians and parents? Draco was the only child in that room who had their Lord there to guide them, so do *not* blame my son for what your husband did.”

“I am not doing that,” Narcissa’s eyes are full of empathy. “And you are not blaming me.”

Severus takes a deep breath and hears the truth in her words. *We both blame Lucius for his ambition.* He nods curtly and Narcissa goes on.

“Harrison behaved as he has always behaved. He stood and spoke where no adult would speak for him. I am saying that whilst he may think it was the right thing to do, it has only given the Dark Lord what he wanted, what he has wanted for months: a way to manipulate Harrison’s power and if he should find out what the child truly is ...”

“That won’t happen,” Severus shakes his head. *The Dark Lord will never know Harrison is a Mage.*

“How?”

“Because he’s going to fail Defence Against the Dark Arts, or at least perform well below the Dark Lord’s expectations,” Severus says flatly, leaning his head back to stare at the ceiling. All of his carefully coordinated lesson plans, all designed to teach Harrison to thrive in an environment that protected his secrets, must be thrown out of the window. Now, he must

ensure that Harrison does not thrive in his classroom and Severus is very fucking annoyed about it. "I will ensure it."

Narcissa shakes her head and then, with a wave of her wand, makes the silver version of Harrison disappear. The room is suddenly much darker and Narcissa's hair glows like water in the very dim firelight.

"Bella lied," she says crisply. "Or did not know what she said. The raven magic is not vicious, it does not bring death. They are thought and memory, legend says they are what makes the Black magic healing magic, at its core."

"Thought and memory," Severus' tongue suddenly feels thick. *Theodore is Norse*. "Huginn and Muninn."

"There is no evidence to suggest that the Black ravens are the ravens of Odin, but I will admit that the coincidence of the Black Lord having the potential to wield them and his paramour being a Son of War ..."

"There are no coincidences," Severus sighs heavily. He thinks of the mark of fate on his child's throat. "There are only mistakes returning to haunt us."

"How dour, Severus."

"Am I wrong?"

Narcissa sighs heavily and shakes her head, her silver hair catching the light.

"These days, I think more and more of my mother," she whispers. "I wonder if she felt this too when the Dark Lord chose Bella and Regulus."

"Felt what?"

"The horror of the shoe being on the other foot," Narcissa's eyes are glassy. In them, Severus sees flames. "My father chose the Dark Lord, then my sister did. Now my son does the same. Once upon a time, we were adolescents determined in our own future, choosing our own Master, we were fearless with naive self belief. Now we have grown to be parents fearing their children's choices."

"I am thoroughly unamused by it if you are asking," Severus sighs. He can almost hear Lupin's voice, wry and clear in his mind: *Those that fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it*. "You know that I could not stop the child from attending the Wizengamot as surely as you could not stop Draco from taking the Mark."

"I know," Narcissa's voice is soft with grief. "Forgive me if you think I blamed you or him, dearest, it is only ..."

"Only what?"

Pale tears slip down Narcissa's cheeks.

“There is grief in Seeing,” she whispers. “For so often I wonder, what choice could I have made to prevent this? Yet even as I rage at it, the noose around us tightens. There is nothing I can do.”

Severus captures her hand and holds it tight. For a moment, he cannot speak because her hopelessness is entirely infectious. *What are we doing, what are any of us doing to stop this from happening?* Then he thinks of Harrison’s words in that memory, standing fragile and wondrous before his peers, offering a choice and in it, a slither of hope: *He’s powerful, but he’s not the only one with power.*

“Eileen once told me that the Seers job is to See not to say. Foresight is a burden that doesn’t indulge interference,” Severus whispers.

“It does not,” Narcissa wipes her cheeks. “Forgive me.”

“Entirely,” Severus says. “I will speak to Harrison also. He needs to know that there are now ... consequences for showing too much power. It would be best if the Dark Lord believe him to be ... talented but not remarkable.”

“You must try, my darling, but I fear the Dark Lord will never consider your child unremarkable,” Narcissa whispers.

Severus thinks of his child, hopefully, asleep safely in the Burrow. He thinks of the letter sent to him from Molly Weasley, telling him that Harrison has been waking regularly, screaming, but is soothed quickly by a combination of her and Ronald’s efforts. He thinks of how much he wishes he could be the one giving Harrison his potions, saying what he knows his child most needs to hear. *You are safe, farzandam.* He sighs heavily. He knows Narcissa is right but he echoes her words all the same:

“I must try.”

— — —

Harry dreams.

He dreams of a cliff overlooking the ocean. He sees a man standing there, dark-skinned, robes billowing in the wind, armour bloody, clutching a wound in his side. He falls to his knees, grunting heavily. Two women are instantly beside him, one fair and one dark, and Harry knows them. *Nimue and Morgana.*

“Merlin, Merlin,” Morgana chants, gripping the lapels of his robes as his head lolls in Nimue’s lap. “Don’t, no, we won, he’s gone, you can’t leave us -,”

“Justice,” Merlin rasps. “We did it.”

Harry stares at them.

“Am I dreaming this?” Harry whispers.

“We remember, Master,” Death says. She is suddenly standing at his shoulder.

“I can’t remember something I wasn’t alive for.”

“Magic remembers.”

“Your magic?”

“Can magic be owned?” Death tilts her head and slowly, Merlin, Morgana and Nimue fade. In their place is the triangle of burning points - two alight, one smoking. “Does the breath in your lungs belong to you?”

“What would you know? You don’t breathe.”

Death laughs, it is both terrible and wonderful. Harry smirks too.

“You are right, Master.” She runs her long fingers through his hair and they stare at the wide, grey sea. “All I know about breathing I learned from you.”

“It’s weird,” Harry sighs heavily. “It’s weird how not-weird you are to me.”

“We always have been, Master. We always will be.”

“That doesn’t make it less weird.”

“You have always been mine.”

Harry turns. Death is gone. Tom Riddle has his hand on Harry’s head and is tilting it back, his grip an icy vice on the back of his neck. Tom grins horribly down at him.

“*Come with me and be remade,*” Tom hisses. Harry can’t move, can’t think, and then Tom’s long finger is pressed against his scar. Then there is pain.

“Harry! Harry, wake up!”

Harry gasps awake, groaning in pain.

“It’s alright, dear,” Mrs Weasley says softly. She’s been there, every time he wakes, just like Severus would be. She brushes his hair back from his face so tenderly, her hands are soft and her magic smells like fresh cotton, but it’s not quite Remus’ very warm touch or the steady, dry hands of his Sire. Harry misses, absurdly, magic that smells like burnt sage.

“Here’s your headache reliever,” Ron presses it to his lips and Harry gulps it back. “Are you gonna be sick, mate?”

“No,” Harry mumbles, sagging back against his pillow. This is the second time he’s woken up tonight. He really wants to go back to sleep, they’re going back to Hogwarts tomorrow, but his dream is pressing against him. The part with Death felt real, the memory of Merlin felt true, and the bit with Tom felt typically horrible of every nightmare he’s had since the cage. *Why the fuck am I so fucking weird?*

You are slowly becoming yourself, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind. *Magic has memory.*

If it’s my memory I don’t remember it, Harry thinks wearily, wishing she was here, but she’s in London, with Theo, ready to resume her public Hogwarts persona as Theo’s pet snake.

I remember.

What the fuck does that mean?

“Try to go back to sleep, boys,” Mrs Weasley says, pulling the duvet cover back over them. Usually, Harry sleeps on a blow-up bed in Ron’s room, but because of Harry’s nightmares, Ron says it’s easier if they just share Ron’s bed. Harry is secretly incredibly grateful. “Remus will be here to pick Harry up in a couple of hours. Try and get a little bit more rest.”

Harry closes his eyes as Mrs Weasley ghosts a soft kiss against his forehead and rolls over. Ron settles back down beside him, rubbing his hand up and down Harry’s back.

“Was it bad?” Ron asks quietly. Ron’s been asking this after every dream. Sometimes, Harry can’t say anything, only hiss and pluck his elastic band, but now he feels he can answer.

“Weird,” Harry mumbles. “Then bad.”

“Voldemort?”

“Yeah.”

Harry sighs as Ron’s gentle but familiar touch soothes him and the headache reliever takes effect.

“You want me to tell you a story?”

“Yeah,” Harry murmurs.

“Okay ... well, this is a good one ... One day, Babbity Rabbity - ”

“Is it about a rabbit?”

“What? No. It’s about a witch.”

Harry snorts.

“Of course.”

“Look, do you want to hear it or not?”

“Fine,” Harry smirks tiredly into his pillow. “Tell me about the non-rabbit Rabbity.”

“Okay. So once upon a time, there was this old witch called Babbity Rabbity who worked as a washerwoman for a silly muggle king ...”

Ron shuffles a bit closer, wrapping one strong arm around Harry and Harry feels himself relax into the scent of Ron’s magic, which smells like oak and tastes like autumn air. *Brother*, something inside Harry whispers. *Safe*. Harry lets himself drift back to sleep.

— — — —

“Harry, you are going to miss this train -,” Remus says, dragging him out of Cafe Nero in Kings Cross. They’ve had a lovely morning, breakfast near the British library with the recommended super hot chocolates and croissants, a bit of a snoop through the current exhibition there and now onto the train. Harry’s tired but glad. It might have only been a few days but he’s missed Remus.

“Well, then you shouldn’t have insisted on stopping at the bookshop!” Harry complains. “They don’t serve coffee on the Express -,”

“Well, you can take that up personally with Minerva,” Remus takes Harry’s sleeve like he’s four, pulling him along distractedly. “I imagine it is because the Express is full of children who don’t need caffeine -,”

“Bollocks, because they have coffee at school -,”

“Please, Harry, come on,” Remus looks worriedly at his watch. “We have fifteen minutes -,”

“Alright, *Tad*. ”

Remus stops. He turns. He stares. Harry grins. He’s been waiting all morning for the right time for this and carefully unfolds the letter that arrived from Gringotts at the Burrow yesterday. He waves it at Remus.

“What is that?” Remus asks slowly.

“Paperwork all went through,” Harry offers it to him. “I’m officially your adopted kid.”

Remus snatches it out of his hand. He stares at the words on the page. Harry takes a sip of his coffee and thinks about how much fun this is going to be to relate to Theo later.

“And you only thought to mention it now?” Remus says in a choked voice.

“Well,” Harry shrugs. “We’ve had a busy morning. What with the bookshop and all.”

“You ... you *absolute* demon child, you -,”

“Rude, Moony, come on -,” Harry grins, pulling Remus over to the barrier so they can casually stumble through it. “Don’t want to be late.”

The platform is fit to bursting and Remus is right, they are late, among the stragglers rushing towards the train. That means that Harry is getting a lot of stares but Harry doesn’t care. Remus is still staring down at the adoption notice.

“Harry!” Hermione yells out of a window. “You’re late!”

“Well aware!” Harry yells back.

“Let me get your stuff mate,” Ron calls, jumping down onto the platform and hauling Harry’s trunk up and Hedwig in her cage before taking his cup of coffee and taking a sip. “Gross, where’s the fucking milk?”

“I drink it black now.”

Harry turns to Remus who is still looking down at the paper. *We are pleased to congratulate Mr Remus Plutarch Lupin on his adoption of the underage Wixen known as Harry James Charlus Potter-Black.* Griphook told him that for the official paperwork they would only include names that could be viewed publicly, in case Remus needed to use it. “You alright there, Rems?”

“Yes,” Remus looks up and holds his gaze, eyes shining bright. “I am, cub.”

Harry hugs him and feels the soaring magic inside him. *Tad. Godfather. My adopted father.*

“Love you, Remus,” he mumbles into Remus’ chest, breathing in the scent of his adopted father’s cardigan - Earl Grey tea and books.

“I love you too, Harry,” Remus whispers croakily. “I am so glad I get to be your father, in some way.”

“Yeah,” Harry pulls back and looks at him. He knows what Remus is thinking. Severus is his Sire and Remus cares about him, he probably doesn’t want to take his spot, and James was his stepdad and Remus loved him and misses him. Harry hesitates. “The Shadowman is okay, y’know. We ... have our own thing going.”

“Your own thing?” Remus smiles, eyes wet.

“Yeah,” Harry’s not sure that either of them understands it but that’s fine. Severus calls him *farzandam* and Harry calls him Severus and that’s all Harry wants or needs. “And ... James, I mean, James would be happy, I reckon. Godfather to adopted father, I think he’d probably say that’s ... that’s how it was meant to be, right? From the beginning?”

Remus’ eyes are glossy with unshed tears.

“Yes,” Remus swallows and looks away, blinking fast. “It was.”

“You’re not replacing him, Rems,” Harry squeezes Remus’ hand. “He was a great stepdad, but this is something different.”

“Stepdad,” Remus whispers. “I didn’t realise you were calling him that.”

Harry doesn’t know how to explain it makes it all easier, to think of James that way. *My stepdad. I called him Dad.* He doesn’t think he knows how to explain it to himself but maybe it’s just like what Ron said, last summer. It helps make space in his heart for other parents. Whatever it is, it feels right for Harry.

“That’s what he was,” Harry says firmly. “He’s my stepdad and you’re ... you’re my *tad* now. Officially.”

“Officially,” Remus repeats, and they both know what they’re not saying. In the unofficial space, in the space that no one knows about where James Potter and Sirius Black replaced Lily Potter and the father of her child, stands Severus.

“I mean, I’m still going to call you Remus and Rems and Moony and Moons -,”

“You can call me whatever you want, Harry,” Remus grins and steps forward, pressing a kiss to Harry’s head. Harry can smell Remus’ creature magic engulfing him. It smells like tall pine trees in the snow and tastes like woodsmoke drifting towards a full moon. It tastes like victory. “Now go and tell the Shadowman that your plans worked out.”

“They always do.”

“I hope so,” Remus smiles. “Off you go.”

“When ...” Harry swallows hard. “Do we have a plan? When will I see you again?”

He hates the idea that he doesn’t know when he will see Remus again. Remus is going to commute to Venice from Spinner’s End. It feels so strange to think of Remus alone in the house with just Kreacher for occasional company.

“I’ll be around, Harry, you know the Shadowman’s floo connects to mine,” Remus says.

“What about Christmas?” Harry urges. “I know last Christmas was, like, kinda wierd but we could do it better this year - the Christmas dinner from the pub was nice and we could maybe get a tree -,”

“Yes, we could,” Remus laughs. “It might be a little soon to make plans but don’t worry, we’ll sort it out. Wherever we are, wherever we end up, we’ll be okay.”

Remus puts a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder. *Wherever we end up, we’ll be okay.* Harry smiles up at his adopted father and, just for a second, truly believes him.

“Werewolf Lupin,” a particular voice sneers.

The second passes.

Harry recognises that voice. He stares into Remus' eyes, sees the way they narrow and how Remus' shoulders slump. Harry knows, he just knows what's going to happen next.

Harry takes a breath and turns around. Lucius Malfoy is standing there, his scar oddly livid on his face. Harry wonders if he's done something to make it look more gruesome.

"You are required to make an appearance before the Wizengamot," Malfoy goes on.
"Immediately."

Behind him are several Aurors that Harry doesn't recognise. He glares at them and then at Malfoy.

"His name is Ambassador Lupin," Harry says shortly.

"This is not your business, Mr Potter-Black," Malfoy says. His eyes are fixed on Remus like he's ready to curse him.

"He is the Lord Potter-Black Apparent," Remus' voice is quiet, "and my son so please don't use that tone with him."

"Your son?" Malfoy's eyes widen but are full of scepticism. "The amount of people who have claimed to father this boy is astonishing, considering -," Malfoy gestures to Harry and it's clear what that means. *Considering he's such a fuck up.* "Do you really expect me to believe this madness?"

"You don't have to believe it," Remus holds up the letter. "I have proof."

"Give it to me," Malfoy demands and Harry can just tell he'll burn it. "Werewolves cannot adopt Wixen children. It is illegal and unethical."

Remus bristles at the word but says nothing. Nor does he hand over the paper.

"Not necessary, Minister, I have a copy ready for your use." Harry is overjoyed to see Magnus appear, Bill at his side for some reason, handing a copy of the letter to Malfoy with a flourish. Tonks is next to them, grinning widely.

"Wotcher, Harry," she whispers, with a flicker of a wink. He's pretty sure that the velvet purple blazer Tonks is wearing is Magnus'. He knows Magnus has been hanging out at Tonks and Bill's quite a bit. Harry knows Bill and Tonks are together but not exclusively and Magnus thinks Bill is 'gorgeous' and Tonks is 'adorably terrifying.' He smirks.

"As an *Anzar* of the goblin nation, I can confirm that Ward has legally been adopted by Ambassador Lupin," Bill says, coming to stand at Harry's side and placing a protective hand on Harry's shoulder. Malfoy glares at the paper and then crumples it into his fist with a triumphant expression. His gaze darts to Harry.

"Once again, Mr Potter-Black looks to be the exception to the rule," he says.

“I’ve been told I am exceptional,” Harry deadpans and behind him, someone snorts with laughter. Harry turns. In the doorway to the train behind him, Ron is frowning down at Lucius Malfoy with his arms folded. All along the train, Harry can see heads poking out of doors and windows to look at them. *Always a fucking show*, Harry thinks bitterly.

“This makes no difference, it does not matter who your child is,” Malfoy glares at Remus. “You are compelled to present yourself before the Wizengamot to account for your crimes.”

“Interesting choice of word,” Magnus says with a curt smile.

“What crimes?” Harry demands.

“I imagine the crime is going to be, ‘being a creature,’” Magnus’ voice is very soft. “Which I think is going to cause some problems.”

“You mean aside from being utter fucking bigotry,” Ron mutters but Malfoy doesn’t hear. His attention is on Magnus.

“I am not sure how it is any of your business, Steward Bane,” Malfoy sneers.

“Because the father of the Lord Black Apparent comes under the protection of the House of Black, Minister,” Magnus says. “Unless the Minister of Magic is interfering in the business of the Noble and Most Ancient houses.”

“Of course not, Steward Bane, but being associated with a Noble and most Ancient house does not exclude a man from our justice system, as the last Lord Black proved with aplomb,” Malfoy snaps back. “As an English citizen, Werewolf Lupin -,”

“That’s not his name,” Harry glares. The Aurors behind him haven’t stopped looking at Remus. He feels the icy chills of the Black Magic rising up his left hand and all of the Aurors fix their eyes on him. He swears he can see Malfoy smirking.

“It is what he is,” Malfoy says.

“Well if we’re calling people what they are then I can call *you* -,”

“Many unflattering things, I am sure,” Magnus jumps in, shooting Harry a warning look. “Being a werewolf does not make a man a criminal, Minister.”

“Perhaps it does,” Malfoy’s eyes glint nastily and Harry knows, just from looking into his eyes, that this is exactly where Malfoy is headed. He wants to push legislation through that makes all werewolves criminals and he wants to start with Remus. “Either way, the Ministry of Magic has the right to detain and question any of its citizens.”

Malfoy gestures to the aurors behind him and they attempt to move forward but Harry quickly steps in front of Remus. Harry knows his hand is glowing and he can see several of the aurors reaching for their wands. Harry glares at them. One of them looks at Harry’s hand and snorts, shaking his head as if Harry’s a fucking joke. *I’ll show you a fucking joke*. Harry quickly shoots his wand down into his right hand and lets the power build in his hand. It’s

like holding a small star. A few of the aurors look confused and the one who laughed looks eager.

“You wanna fucking try me?” He glares at the auror, who actually looks like he would answer that question in the affirmative.

“Harry,” Remus jerks Harry around so he is facing Remus. His amber eyes are blazing orange. “Stop. I mean it. Stop. This isn’t how we’re going to handle things.”

“Remus is right Harry,” Tonks says. She’s standing nearby, sort of between Harry and Remus and the ministry employees with Bill and Magnus, creating a three-person barrier. *House of Black, the Silver Hall, the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry thinks dazedly. *Patterns of three*. “Best to stay calm.”

“Auror Tonks is right,” Malfoy said, putting an emphasis on her title.

“On my day off, Minister,” Tonks says cheerily, linking her fingers with Bill’s. Malfoy sniffs with distaste.

“Working your second job, I assume?” He sneers, before turning back towards Harry and Remus. Harry’s not surprised that Malfoy knows who is in the Order of the Phoenix and who isn’t. “Werewolf Lupin should calmly come along with the aurors, if he knows what is good for him.”

Remus has his hands on Harry’s shoulders, stopping him from turning around and hissing at Malfoy, so he hisses it to the train over Remus’ shoulder.

“Fucking fuck you, you motherfucking wanker, I wish Sirius had fucking ripped your fucking face off -,”

“Harry,” Remus grabs Harry’s face, pulling his attention to Remus’ slightly glowing eyes. “I’m going to go with them, but it’s going to be fine, it’s all going to be fine.”

Harry shakes his head. He is full of magic and fire and he knows if he does not keep his fists clenched as tight as he can bear, he will unleash it on everyone. He closes his eyes. *I won’t destroy Kings Cross today. I won’t, I won’t, I won’t.*

“Calm down,” Remus is whispering, stroking his hands through Harry’s hair. “Take deep breaths, cub.”

“I’m not going to let you go,” Harry’s voice is trembling. He knows he mustn’t open his eyes because there is a chance, there is a very good chance that if he does, he’ll lose control of his voice magic and compel Remus. Magnus’ lessons are loud in his mind. *Compulsions rely upon eye contact, little Mage. If you are unsure you can control it, don’t look.* “You’re not going to do this.”

“Harry we prepared -,”

“No,” Harry winces, he knows there’s too much magic in his voice, not enough to compel but enough to be noticed. *Think, farzandam*, Harry imagines Severus saying. He takes a

shuddering breath and opens his eyes. Over Remus' shoulder, he sees Lucius Malfoy looking eager, smug, staring at him triumphantly and Harry realises what this is: *he wants me to fight for Remus so he can arrest me too. He wants to have me in custody. He wants to test my power and tell Voldemort.* He looks into Remus' eyes. If it were Severus, he would see everything in Harry's eyes, he would see his thoughts etched like chalk on a board in the back of Harry's head, but Remus isn't a legilimens. Instead, Remus just knows him.

"This is about me, isn't it?" Harry whispers. Remus smiles wryly and presses his palm against Harry's cheek. There is the sound of a whistle blowing.

"Get on the train," Remus whispers back. "Let me deal with this."

"No," Harry shakes his head, fighting the urge to cry. "*No*, you can't -,"

"You are my son," Remus' eyes are fierce. "Harry, I need you to do as you're told and get on the train."

"No -,"

"Come on, mate," Ron is reaching down, holding Harry's arm and leveraging him up onto the steps of the train. He feels like the world is turning too fast and he can't stop it.

"No!"

There has to be something I can do. Harry looks wildly down the platform and suddenly, sees a familiar set of red robes. He remembers his Italian lessons in Rome.

"Aiutami!"

Help me.

The Contessa looks over from where she is speaking to Blaise in one of the train doorways. Harry wonders if they've been listening.

"Harry, what-?" Remus asks but Harry shakes Ron off and jumps back down. Further along, Blaise instantly jumps down and runs down the platform towards the train conductor. Harry thinks he sees a flash of dark hair in the doorway and realises with a lurch Theo has been there, hiding behind Blaise, watching. He sees a familiar cloud of black hair leaning further out and Harry's relieved to see Hermione looking out, frowning fiercely. He imagines Theo is right behind her, hissing at her to tell him exactly what's going on. He gives her a sudden, sharp look that he hopes she understands: *For fuck's sake, don't let Theo off the train.* Hermione nods firmly.

"*Mi scusi*, Contessa," Harry says, trying to move forward to meet her but Remus has a hand clenched on his arm and Magnus, Bill and Tonks are still standing between Remus and the aurors. "I need ..."

Harry doesn't know what he needs. He stares at her desperately.

“How can I help, Lord Potter-Black Apparent?” The Contessa asks softly. She takes in the scene in front of her and nods at Lucius Malfoy. “Well met, Minister Malfoy.”

“Well met indeed, honourable Contessa,” Malfoy says, politely inclining his head. “Apologies for interrupting your goodbyes with your child. Do not trouble yourself, this is not within your purview.”

“I am not troubled, Minister,” her red eyes dart between Magnus and Bill and Remus. “Well met, Magnus Bane, now Steward to the House of Black and you also, *Anzar* Weasley.” She gestures to Remus. “In what capacity do you guard this man?”

“He is the father to the ward of the Silver Hall,” Bill says.

“The guardianship only extends to blood relatives,” Malfoy says smoothly. “A barely legal adoption does not relieve Werewolf Lupin of the weight of law as it did the last Lord Black.”

“There is nothing barely legal about the adoption processes of the Goblin Nation,” Bill says sharply.

“Your role, Steward Black?” The Contessa’s eyes rest on Magnus.

“Remus Lupin is the father of the future Lord Black,” Magnus says, bowing to the Contessa and kissing her carnelian ring. “*Come state*, Contessa?”

“*Non mi posso lamentare*, Steward,” the Contessa responds, just as Blaise jogs up to join her.

“They will wait,” Blaise murmurs.

“I am not sure it is appropriate for you to stall the train on the account of Potter-Black’s whims,” Malfoy says. “After all, this is the purview of the DMLE and the Ministry of Magic, not the Congregation.”

His smile is wintry and polite but his eyes are steel. The Contessa merely looks at him impassively and then shrugs, in such a perfect Italian gesture and looks at Harry.

“Let us find out if what you say is true,” she says, repeating her question. “How can I help, Lord Potter-Black Apparent?”

Her eyes seem to drift to Remus and Harry feels certain that she’s trying to tell him something, trying to remind him of something, something he needs to ask for. He remembers his conversation with Severus on his birthday: “*And Remus has a house in France and a job in Venice so -,*” ... “*So he can be registered as a resident there, under the Congregation.*”

“Citizenship,” Harry blurts out, grabbing Remus’ hand. “That’s - that’s how the adoption works, Remus - the citizenship -,” Harry wishes he could form better sentences but thank fucking God, Blaise is there, eyebrows lifting in understanding.

“Ambassador Lupin is indeed a citizen of Magical Europe, under the Congregation laws,” Blaise says quietly. “*Corretto*, Contessa?”

“He wants to arrest Remus for being a Werewolf!” Harry points at Malfoy, past Magnus’ shoulder, only for Magnus to instantly push his hand down. The Contessa’s eyes narrow.

“Is this true, Minister?” She asks quietly. “Are you attempting an unlawful arrest on a non-English Citizen?”

Malfoy looks like he has swallowed a lemon but he smiles tightly.

“Has this citizenship been approved by the department of immigration?” He asks. “I have heard nothing from the head of the department.”

“It has been approved by Gringotts,” Bill says. “It is the only way the adoption could be legal.”

“Since England still does not allow Werewolves many of their basic rights,” Remus mutters.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Malfoy says.

“Even if the proper paperwork has not reached the correct department, the Ministry of Magic cannot arrest a European creature,” the Contessa says softly.

“That is true only if the creature has been certified to be not a citizen of Magical England,” Malfoy looks at Remus with a greedy look. “Werewolf Lupin has not been.”

“The burden of proof lies upon the authority, not the individual, Minister,” Magnus says, though Harry has no idea what that means.

“Only if the accused is not on wixen land governed by the Ministry of Magic,” Malfoy smiles like a fox who has seen a rabbit. “Kings Cross Station in London is.”

“That may be true but we are not currently in Kings Cross Station or London.” The Contessa’s voice is soft but clear. “Platform nine and three-quarters is a magical portal, not a geographic location.”

“Unless you are to argue for the nationality of portal magic, Minister,” Magnus’ smile is sharp. “Which we all know would be folly.”

“The werewolf entered the portal through English soil,” Malfoy glares at Magnus. “He shall have to leave through it and at *that* point, he shall be within my jurisdiction.”

“Then I suggest to my Ambassador that he exit the portal with me,” the Contessa says easily. She looks at Remus, red eyes blazing. “Ambassador Lupin, as a citizen of Magical Europe and of the Congregation, *not* the Ministry of Magic, I recall you to Venice indefinitely. You will cease to serve as an Ambassador in England and will instead take your seat full time on the Creature council as a Creature Counsellor. You shall not set foot on English soil again until these charges are dropped. Congratulations on your new role, I know you will serve us well.”

“I will do so to the best of my ability,” Remus says quietly, bowing his head towards the Contessa.

Harry feels like a stone has fallen into his stomach and his arm hurts from where Remus is clenching it so much. All he can think about is their home at Spinner's End, the books that Remus has stacked up there that he will need, the cardigans thrown over the chairs he needs to gather and how he can never go back. *He can never come home.* Spinner's End will be locked up and left unoccupied. The notion of the house that they have called home being closed up and left dusty and dark is very unsettling and Harry's never felt that before. But Harry knows Remus has to do this. He needs to stay safe, away from Lucius Malfoy.

"Send Kreacher," Harry mutters faintly. "He'll ... he'll get your stuff."

Remus nods, his jaw tight, face completely set into a mask.

"Stay safe," Remus mutters, too quietly for anyone to hear. "Love you."

"You too," Harry mutters back. Remus faces the others.

"I am yours to command, honourable Contessa," Remus says, his voice calm but stoic. He turns and looks at Malfoy. "I do not recognise your authority over me, Minister for Magic. I am a citizen of Magical Europe, not of the Ministry of Magic. The Congregation is my government, I reside in their lands, I work in their offices and I raise my child in their jurisdiction. I will not be the scapegoat in your anti-werewolf agenda."

Malfoy gives him a long, hard look.

"You have still committed crimes here that you will account for," he says softly. "Trust me, werewolf, you *will* be brought to account."

"Then I suggest you begin an extradition process, Minister." The Contessa gestures for Remus to join her at her side. Remus gives Harry's hand one final squeeze and moves away. Harry takes a last, deep breath in of Remus' creature magic: cold snow on a dark night, the bright scent of tall pine trees. As Remus moves, Blaise slips past Magnus and Bill to stand beside Harry. "Be assured, Minister, if you intend to persecute a member of the Congregation on the basis of their Creaturehood, you shall find the process arduous."

He can feel Ron behind him and that helps, he can't smell Remus' magic anymore but he can smell marjoram and cinnamon, which is Bill's and he can smell bubblegum for Tonks and amber and frankincense for Magnus. He's surrounded by people, people literally standing between him and Malfoy, as if they all know the truth. Harry is the real prize that the Minister of Magic came to claim. Malfoy is glaring at the Contessa with a calculated expression.

"This is the avenue of diplomacy you wish to pursue?" Malfoy says quietly. "There has been peace between our governments for five hundred years."

Harry almost jolts forward but Blaise has a hold of his arm. *I don't want anyone to go to war for me.*

"Courage, my Lord," Blaise whispers. Harry nods. Harry doesn't want to start a war, here on Platform nine and three quarters but once again, the world feels like it's hurtling at a million

miles an hour and he has no idea what's happening. Politics, Harry is realising, is a lot of talking underneath talking and he can't keep up. *No wonder Theo is so fucking good at this.*

"All I have done today is adequately protect those that are mine to protect," the Contessa spreads her hands. "I have not encroached upon your jurisdiction or that of the Goblin King's."

"We appreciate it," Bill says tautly. "The portal of this platform is not Goblin land, we do not claim any incursion. The Goblin Nation is pleased with our alliance with the Congregation of Europe."

"Thank you, *Anzar* Weasley," she inclines her head gently and looks at Malfoy. "Does the Ministry of Magic say different?"

There is a long pause. Harry doesn't know what is happening but he thinks it might be the moment when a war is declared.

"It does not," Malfoy's voice is clipped. Harry feels Blaise relax a minuscule amount beside him. Malfoy's eyes rest on Blaise's hand on Harry's arm. "Though the notion that diplomacy is governed by a teenage fancy ..."

"By family, Minister," the Contessa says sharply. Malfoy raises his eyebrows and narrows his grey eyes at Harry, specifically where Blaise is touching him. Beside him, Blaise takes a sharp breath in through his nose.

"Is that official?" Malfoy whispers. Harry does not understand even a little bit.

"It is," Blaise says, tightening his grip on Harry's arm. Harry sees Remus frowning slightly.

"Why so surprised, Minister?" the Contessa says. "Does not the governance of the Sacred Twenty Eight in England rest on the same principals?"

"Then I wish you good day, honourable Contessa," Malfoy says, bowing to her. "We thank you once again for seeing it best to educate your heir in our isles."

"Hogwarts is in Scotland," Remus says quietly. Harry feels a flicker of hope. Scotland isn't England. *Remus can still come there.*

"A nation that we at the Ministry of Magic pride ourselves on having excellent Magical alliances with, just like the Congregation," Malfoy says smoothly. He lifts a hand towards the train guard in a signal and the whistle blows. "Farewell, Ambassador - forgive me, *Counsellor* Lupin. Until we meet again."

"Until then," Remus says, and there is a definite growl in his voice. Harry knows he's thinking of all the ways he could kill him. Then, the Contessa is bowing to Malfoy and pulls a red stone out of her pocket. Harry knows that in seconds, Remus will be gone.

"Get on the train," Blaise mutters, pushing Harry up and suddenly Ron has his arms around him and he's being pulled aboard. The door slams behind him and Harry immediately turns and leans out of the window with Blaise, looking down on the platform just in time to catch

the moment that Remus' eyes lock with his and then suddenly, the Contessa and Remus have disappeared in a swirl of red magic. *Gone. He can't come back to England.* Magnus is still standing between the door and Malfoy with a neat smile on his face.

"Ever thought of cutting it?" Magnus gestures to Malfoy's hair. "Must get in the way, mustn't it?"

Then the train begins to move. Malfoy stays stock still, watching it go, glaring at the Hogwarts Express but Magnus turns to face him.

"Write!" Harry calls over the steam.

"Remember your lessons," Magnus says, stepping closer as the train jerks forward. "Intention, Harry. Trust your senses, listen and taste, and above all, trust yourself."

"I will."

"Your bonds are your strength," Magnus repeats, like he has many times before. "Family bonds, Harry. Trust them."

Harry swallows hard. His three family bonds, Hermione, Remus and Severus (not that he'll ever fucking tell Severus, and Magnus has assured him that he never has to if he doesn't want to). He nods painfully, wishing suddenly, he wasn't going back. *I want to go home to Spinners End.* Harry knows he can't do that. He wants to tell Magnus to get a message to Severus but he doesn't know how so he leans out of the window, grabbing Magnus' many-ringed hand as he and Tonks and Bill begin walking down the platform, keeping a slow pace.

"Jesus, Harry," Ron grunts beside him, holding Harry's waist to keep him inside the train.

"Does he always do shit like this?" Blaise says.

"Tell him where Remus is, tell him what happened-," Harry hisses in parseltongue, feeding it to Magnus. *"Move some money to France for Remus-,"*

"I've got it under control, Harry," Magnus squeezes Harry's hand and for a second, he feels warm, just like Magnus made him feel when Harry went to see him in St Mungo's after Sirius. "Don't worry, I'll take care of your new Dad. Have fun at school."

"I'll miss you," Harry whispers. He doesn't think Magnus can hear it over the train moving but he grins and Harry knows he's heard. Then Ron and Blaise are pulling him back inside and they all tumble to the floor of the vestibule, breathing hard. The train gathers speed underneath them. They are going back to Hogwarts.

The Trinacria Zabini

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Blaise has a proposal.
Next time, Daphne has feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Stay inside the train, is that too much to ask?” Ron heaves, resting his head back against the wood panelled wall.

“One would think not,” Blaise says breathlessly. “In between almost starting a war, you should be able to make time for it.”

“Fuck,” Harry whispers, closing his eyes and thumping his head back against the wall repeatedly. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck -,”

“Hey, hey, hey,” he smells Ron’s woody magic engulfing him and suddenly, Ron’s holding his head still with strong hands. “Enough of that. This wasn’t your fault.”

“Like fuck it wasn’t,” Harry mutters, opening his eyes to glare at his friend. “He wanted *me*, he wanted me to kick off so he could take me as well as Remus -,”

“And you didn’t,” Blaise says, pulling himself up. “Which was good.”

“Yeah, very kind of you not to blow up Kings Cross, Harry, really appreciate it,” Ron chortles.

“Kreacher!” Harry yells.

“Harry, house elves can’t apparate onto something that’s moving it’s -,” Blaise is stopped in his sentence by the appearance of Kreacher, wobbly and stumbling against Harry.

“Master must not call on train!” Kreacher snarls, slapping Harry around the head, and shaking his ears like a wet dog. “Makes Kreacher dizzy!”

“Impossible,” Blaise says slowly, looking down on Kreacher. “How did you do that?”

“Kreacher does not tell,” Kreacher glares at Blaise and pinches Harry. “Master went for super duper hot chocolate without Kreacher. Master *betrayed* Kreacher -,”

“I *told* you I will get you one next time!” Harry rubs the sore spot on his arm from Kreacher’s pinch. “Will you just fucking help me?”

“Why does Master call?” Kreacher begins to grin slowly. “What has ignoble master done? Why does Master need Kreacher? Is Master so very dull and stupid he cannot cope without Kreacher’s help?”

“Yeah, alright!” Harry winces. “Can you go and get all of Remus’ stuff from home and take it to the Castello in Venice?”

Harry looks up at Blaise to confirm and he nods, still staring at Kreacher.

“No,” Kreacher snaps. “Mopey wolf can get his own things.”

“Mopey wolf’s been fucking *chased out* of the sodding country,” Harry glares at him. “So can you please just be helpful?”

Kreacher gives him a long, unimpressed stare.

“Wolf is gone?” He says shortly. “Chased by Minister?”

“Yep,” Harry sighs, leaning his head back again. “He’s got to move to Europe.”

He can’t come back. We can’t all come back together. For some reason, it’s the worst thought Harry’s had today.

“Master wants Kreacher to watch him?” Kreacher glares. “In Venice?”

“Yes,” Harry doesn’t see any point in pretending he’s not really worried about Remus right now. “I do.”

Kreacher rolls his bulbous eyes.

“Kreacher will go,” he croaks. “For a fee.”

“What do you want?”

“What does Master have?”

“Nothing,” Harry digs in his pockets but he didn’t buy anything in Nero’s and all his bribery sweets are in his trunk. He looks helplessly up at Ron. “You?”

“Snacks? Always got snacks, mate,” Ron grins and digs into his back pocket. He pulls out the last two crunchies Harry brought him. “Alright, Kreacher?”

Kreacher snatches them up and sniffs them.

“Will do,” his eyes fix on Blaise. “What does Honourable Contessa’s son have?”

“Oh no,” Harry says, “Don’t go nicking Blaise’s stuff -,”

“I have *confetti*,” Blaise says, reaching for the inside pocket of his red, velvet blazer.

“Huh?” Ron stares at the paper wrapper and the Italian script.

“Sugared almonds, no, Blaise, don’t give him posh treats,” Harry groans.

“Master keeps treats from Kreacher,” Kreacher snaps.

“Kreacher already has a pissing *habit*,” Harry snaps back. “I should send you to a support group or something -,”

“Kreacher will take yummy nuts,” Kreacher snatches them from Blaise’s hands and looks smugly at Harry. “Kreacher will do Master’s bidding.”

“Too right. So go home and then go to Venice and *listen* to Remus, okay? Don’t be a shit and steal all his chocolate again,” Harry says sternly, remembering the war that started when they lived in Skye at the beginning of the summer. “And listen to ... y’know.”

Severus.

“Kreacher will *listen*,” Kreacher cackles, disappearing with a pop.

“Dammit! Again!” Harry scowls. “Left a fucking loophole!”

“Is there a reason why your elf is so powerful and never seems to obey you without bribery?” Blaise asks, leaning against the door and folding his arms.

“Yeah,” Harry rolls his eyes. “Because he’s a manipulative little dick.”

“Ah, well, he’s not killed Remus yet,” Ron laughs, getting up to his feet. “Let’s find the others, I’ve got cauldron cakes in my bag.”

Harry nods and lets Ron pull him to his feet before opening the door to the rest of the train. Harry stares down it, seeing rows of faces leaning out of compartments to stare at him. Harry realises something. *It never fucking stops.*

“Come on,” Blaise says, gently putting a hand on Harry’s elbow and guiding him down the train with Ron behind them. It doesn’t stop the stares. The thing Harry notices, more than his younger years, is the resentment in them. The sneering is in full force, the curious eyes full of blame, as if Harry can see every single Daily Prophet headline they’ve absorbed running behind them. Sirius Black the convict, Sirius Black the murderer, Sirius Black caught by a righteous ministry and executed. *Son of the executed murder*, Harry thinks drolly. *Never been that before.*

“Why didn’t the Minister arrest you Potter?” Pansy Parkinson yells as they pass.

“For what?” Ron snaps at her. “Getting on a train?”

“Breaking into the Department of Mysteries would do it,” Harry hears Parkinson’s friend mutter beside her and sees Parkinson smirk smugly. Harry wonders just how many versions of that story have been spread far and wide. Lucius Malfoy can’t stop the Prophet from being terrified of Voldemort, but he’s managed to create so much confusion about what actually happened at the Ministry, that it seems Harry’s come out as the villain again. *Why am I not surprised?* Harry catches sight of Malfoy’s blonde hair and is glad he doesn’t have to see his face. The last thing he wants right now is to taste the stupid compulsion. Blaise opens the door to a compartment and Harry ducks inside, grateful to see Hermione, Daphne and Theo all looking up from their books. Hermione stands up quickly and hugs Harry tightly.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispers and Harry sighs, letting himself be encased in blackberry scented magic. “He’ll be fine. Life is so much better for werewolves in Europe, he’ll be so much safer, and the *libraries* that Creature Counsellors get access to -,”

“Alright, ‘Mione,” Ron says, touching her shoulder to stop her stream of consciousness. “Harry’s okay, right, mate?”

“Yeah,” Harry takes a deep breath in of Hermione’s scent, letting himself be comforted by the taste of her magic and then pulls away. He looks at Theo. He looks beautiful, as always, in all black. He knows he can’t hug him, can’t touch him, can’t risk someone catching them and he needs to get into the habit of that again but he smiles tightly at him and tries to push assurance through the bond: *I’m okay*. Theo nods tautly and flicks his eyes to the space next to him. Harry slumps down beside him and immediately feels Theo’s thoughts pressing urgently against him where their knees casually touch: *None of this is your fault*. Harry sighs and leans his head back.

“Where’s Luna?” Harry asks. It might be nice to have Luna here right now, the cold depths of her magic, the scent and taste of it, might be calming.

“With Nev and Gin,” Ron says, immediately pulling cauldron cakes out of his trunk and handing them out to everyone. Harry simply stares at his. He knows breakfast was a long time ago and it’s a long journey but he really doesn’t feel like eating anything.

“Try a bit,” Hermione urges him softly, looking down at the cake and up at Harry. He instantly blushes, feeling weird that everyone knows this is hard for him. Oddly, it’s Blaise he looks at. Blaise merely gives him a lopsided smile and reaches into his other pocket, pulling out a small wrapped biscuit and handing it over. Harry takes it and grins. It’s biscotti.

“Breakfast of champions,” Harry smirks.

“*Si*,” Blaise says. In Rome, biscotti and espresso were how Harry started the day and was the snack Blaise always had on hand when they had a break between exams. He bites of the corner and feels Theo relax beside him, sees Hermione’s shoulders lower in relief.

“Well,” she says, splitting her cauldron cake with Daphne. “So much for starting the year by laying low.”

Harry snorts with laughter and Ron rolls his eyes at the two of them, fondly.

“It’s not every day the Minister for Magic almost declares war on the Congregation,” Daphne says. Unlike Harry and Ron and Hermione, who are all dressed in jeans and t-shirts and hoodies, Daphne is wearing an impeccable navy dress with a Peter Pan collar. Harry smirks slightly when he notices how Hermione’s eyes keep darting to the knee length cream socks Daphne is sporting.

“You’d be surprised,” Blaise says lightly. He is still leaning against the door. “Speaking of which, we need to talk about what happened.”

“Look, I’m sorry for dragging you into it,” Harry sighs.

“That’s not what we need to talk about,” Blaise’s voice is oddly flat. He reaches into up for his school bag on the luggage rack and pulls something out, offering it to Harry. “You need to wear this.”

There’s a box in his hand. Small, the size of Harry’s palm, and in velvet the colour of blood. Beside him, Theo stiffens. Sitting across the way, so does Daphne.

“Is it a courting gift?” Harry asks, taking the box from Blaise and opening it to look inside. Sitting on a black satin cushion is a pin. It’s made of silver and gold, an odd looking thing that has the face of a woman with rubies for eyes and three legs twisted around her in a triangle shape.

“A trinacria,” Theo whispers with a sharp breath in. Daphne’s eyes are fixed upon it, her book sliding off her lap with a thunk.

“So it is a courting gift?” Ron repeats with a frown. Hermione is staring between Daphne and the pin with curiosity, slowly reaching down to pick up Daphne’s book and setting it on her lap. The action seems to jerk Daphne out of some kind of trance.

“In the House of Zabini, allegiance is shown in different ways,” Daphne says quietly. “The head of Medusa is a symbol of the *Donas de Fuera*.”

“It’s on the Sicilian flag,” Hermione stares at Blaise. “Your clan is on the Sicilian flag?”

Blaise shrugs.

“What does this mean then if it’s not a courting gift?” Ron swallows his cauldron cake and licks his lips. “Harry wearing Zabini’s pin?”

“Intent to join the family,” Theo’s voice is very quiet. “Intent to be wed.”

Harry takes in a sharp breath and watches as Theo glares at Blaise. So does Ron. So does Hermione. In fact, only Daphne and Harry are the only ones not glaring at him and for a second, their eyes meet, and Harry sees a kind of deep confusion there that he feels is entirely justified.

“What’s going on?” Harry asks slowly, breaking the silence.

"Before you think about throwing that knife of yours about, please consider carefully why I am suggesting this," Blaise says, voice soft and eyes fixed only on Theo. "Please."

Theo takes a sharp breath in and then takes the box away from Harry. He looks down at it in his hands, looking cross and depressed at once, but he nods. Harry stares at Blaise, still completely confused.

"You need to explain," he says.

"On the platform, the Contessa said she acted to defend family," Blaise says. "The Contessa knew that in order to secure Ambassador Lupin, you would draw him into your family and the scope of your political influence but your influence is not enough, Harry. You're not strong enough yet. This -," Blaise nods to the pin. "This will make you strong enough to protect your new father because it allows the Contessa to act in a way to protect a potential family member rather than ... an employee. Officially."

"So that's what she meant when she said family and why you said we were ... officially ..." Harry says slowly. "That's why Malfoy looked so put out. Because Remus is my Dad and if I married you he would be your father in law ..."

"Yes," Blaise says shortly. Theo snaps the box closed and pushes it back into Harry's hands. Then Theo stands up and walks to the window, staring at the passing countryside. Harry doesn't know what to do or think and finds himself, a little desperately, staring at Ron. He's grateful when Ron nods, and leans forward, folding his hands thoughtfully and looking up at Blaise.

"Not to be, like, a knob, Zabini, but you've spent the summer practically living with Fred so I think I can say this: what *the actual fuck* are you doing?"

Theo snorts with bitter laughter. Harry won't look at him. The world is speeding past the window and once again, he feels like he's lost his footing, as if everything is jerking too fast towards an ending he doesn't understand. *Remus can't come home. Blaise wants to help me protect him.* He knows these things are true but he feels nothing but desolate when he looks at the pin.

"I'm doing my job," Blaise says quietly. "I am a consort shield."

"But you're making *yourself* the consort," Hermione glares at him. "And lets not even talk about how its insane for Harry to even have a bonded shield let alone a *consort* shield -,"

"I didn't know it was weird!" Harry protests. The consort shield vow is just one of the things Hermione has freaked out over this summer. *Imagine how fucking freaked she'd be by the fidelity bond.*

"And is it the consort bond you object to or the consort, in particular?" Theo mutters. Harry notices the sharp glare Hermione throws him and knows its the second. He shoots Hermione an annoyed glare but she simply frowns back.

"You're my brother," she says emphatically. "My *younger* brother, I might add -,"

"I know," Harry reaches over to grab her hand. "And I love it, you know I do, you're a fucking *amazing* sister."

Ron grins at them both and Hermione smiles tearfully. Harry feels gratitude swelling inside him because she really is the best sister in the world.

"That means it's my bloody job to make sure you don't get, like, swept up in all this pureblood craziness!" Hermione goes on. Harry smirks fondly. Pureblood craziness is exactly how he would characterise all this.

"And I suppose it's up to you to decide what's crazy and what isn't," Theo mutters.

"I'm not an idiot, Nott," Hermione glares at his back.

"Neither am I," Theo's voice is sharp and Harry winces. Hermione and Theo have been getting along okay over the summer, there's been a grudging level of distant academic respect particularly with the OWLS, but Harry knows they had a big fight when he was kidnapped and it seems like all of that hasn't quite gone away. Now that they're going to back to Hogwarts, the lines drawn with houses and different colours ties seem to be emerging again, as if they were not gone but only buried under the freedom of the summer, clever shit and relief that Harry lived. Harry gets it, but he wishes they would just talk about it. He can feel Theo's tension in the bond and smell Hermione's protectiveness in her magic, sweet and tart, like blackberry juice. Ron catches his eye and rolls his eyes.

"Their problem, mate," Ron mutters, "not yours."

Harry tries not to wince but he knows Ron's right. He can't force his sister and the boy he loves to get along. Theo is as pureblood as they come. Hermione isn't. He wouldn't want either of them to change their values to suit the other, even if it is, at this moment, really fucking awkward.

"Can we stick to the facts?" Blaise's eyes are suddenly sharp. "Harry and Theodore cannot be seen together. He -," Blaise points at Theo. "Is the son of the deceased best friend of the Dark Lord. He is fighting already to steer his political position into neutral and he is *barely* covered by the protection of Lord Greengrass in that but if Lord Gaunt gets wind of this ..."

Blaise gestures between Theo and Harry.

"Theo's dead," Harry swallows hard. Ron shakes his head.

"Merlin, Nott, couldn't you have picked literally anyone else to be your secret not-boyfriend boyfriend?" He says sarcastically.

"No," Theo's voice is distant. "I couldn't."

Harry's stomach clenches at the resignation in Theo's voice. *He doesn't regret me but that doesn't make it easy.*

"That doesn't explain why *you*, Zabini," Hermione says staunchly, staring at Blaise with an unusually suspicious expression.

"How flattering, Granger," Blaise says drily.

"Look, mate, she's not trying to be, like, rude," Ron says firmly. "But look here - we've been doing this shit -," he gestures between him, Harry and Hermione. "For *years*. We don't just, like, let more people in without asking some serious questions."

Harry is reminded that whilst they all have an uneasy kind of alliance, whilst Ron seems to not hate Theo as much as he did and whilst Hermione sort of gets on with Blaise and fancies Daphne, it's no guarantee that Ron and Hermione *trust* them. Hermione nods and both he and Ron give Harry solemn looks. Harry feels slightly exasperated but very loved. He smiles and tries to swallow the sudden urge he has to cry.

"Then allow him to give some serious answers," Daphne says quietly. Blaise shoots her a thankful expression and then gestures between Harry and Theo.

"They cannot even look at one another without reason but I can give them a reason. If Harry and I deepen our relationship publicly, it gives them grace. A smokescreen to act behind. " Blaise gestures around the room. "All of this, us sitting together, being in the same *space* it only works if people believe I have a reason to care about Harry."

"You had that already with the courtship," Hermione frowns.

"We've been pretending to court for a year," Blaise says. "Usually, for a wixen of Harry's status and family, promises would have been exchanged by now."

"Is that true?" Hermione demands, rounding on Ron. He grimaces and nods slowly.

"I mean, yeah, in the Sacred Twenty Eight," Ron mutters and then quirks his lip at Harry. "You just had to go and be a fucking *Black* didn't you?"

Harry smirks tautly, but he can't help but think that if, in another life, he and Theo were courting openly as two heirs of the Sacred Twenty Eight, there would be an expectation that they might be getting engaged and for some reason, that thought makes him want to be sick. He puts the rest of the biscotti down, unfinished.

"Wait, I'm a Potter," Hermione frowns. "Are the rules different for Potters?"

"Potters aren't in the Sacred Twenty Eight," Ron shakes his head.

"Why not?" Hermione wonders aloud. *Because they're descended from the Peverells who were Necromancers*, Harry thinks to himself.

"Dunno," Ron shrugs, nodding to Theo. "Ask him. His Dad wrote the sodding list."

"I have no insight into the inner workings of my ancestor Cantankerous Nott," Theo says distantly, still refusing to look at any of them.

"Weird name," Hermione mutters.

“But, y’know, lots of the old families follow the traditions,” Ron goes on. “Even if they’re not one of the twenty-eight.”

“And some don’t follow tradition even if they *are* in the twenty-eight,” Daphne says quietly. “Like the Weasleys.”

“Hey, my Mum and Dad did the whole shabang!” Ron protests. “Courtied in their sixth year, got engaged in their seventh ...”

“That’s because your mother was a Prewett,” Daphne says.

“True. Grand Da Weasley wouldn’t have given a fuck but my Grandfather Prewett was more traditional.” Ron shrugs and looks at Hermione. “No one says Harry has to do anything, right, but, like ... He’s Lord *Black*. It’s the oldest Noble House and he’s courting *him* ...”

Ron nods at Blaise who shrugs, as if his massive influence as the heir of the Head of the Congregation is basically inconsequential.

“Exactly,” Blaise nods. “If we go back to Hogwarts without promises exchanged, people may begin to question the validity of the courtship.”

“So?” Hermione scowls. She obviously hates this whole thing. “Harry doesn’t need to be a celebrity, he had enough of that with the Tournament.”

Harry shoots her a sudden, grateful expression. It’s nice to be reminded that someone understands just how much being famous has fucked him over.

“He produced wings made of magic in the Wizengamot,” Daphne says. “He’s a celebrity.”

“That words sucks,” Harry scowls.

“Would you prefer to be called notorious?” Daphne arches a neat eyebrow.

“Probably.”

“The point is, If they question the validity of the courtship they could question the validity of the Contessa’s involvement in Ambassador Lupin’s life,” Blaise says flatly.

“Wait, so this is all about telling a good lie? And that’s enough of a reason to, like, fuck over my brother?” Ron frowns.

“I’m not fucking him over, as fun as that sounds,” Blaise’s voice is oddly devoid of lightness. “He is Harry’s guard and I am Harry’s consort-shield, we understand our positions.”

“Bollocks,” Ron leans forward, his face stern and determined as it always is when he is being protective of family. “What do you actually *want* here, Zabini?”

“Me?” Blaise laughs. “*A chi importa?*”

Harry doesn't understand the Italian but it's the laugh that gives him pause. It's surprisingly cold and bitter for someone like Blaise. Daphne instantly rises and stands in front of him. She presses her hand over his heart. Her face doesn't change, nothing changes, yet Blaise's eyes soften.

"I do, *il tesero mio*," she whispers. It's the first time that Harry has ever heard that Italian endearment returned. For a moment, as Harry looks at them both, he feels a terrible burden between his shoulder blades and knows, instantly, that Blaise is in a lot of fucking pain over this. Harry needs to know why.

"Can I ... can I talk to you?" Harry says. "Just you?"

Theo's head snaps around, his expression wounded.

"With Theo?" Harry adds, jerking his head towards him. Blaise nods.

"You don't have to do anything," Hermione says to Harry sternly and Ron nods. "This is all based on the idea that because something's been done this way for ages it has to be done this way, but that's bullshit. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Harry doesn't say anything, just nods. He's grateful for their protectiveness but they don't know what he knows: Blaise is sad. The others march out, Daphne kissing Blaise's cheek softly. He brushes a hand through her hair.

"*Grazie, Il mio tesoro*," Blaise smiles but not the way he usually does. Harry can see it's forced. Daphne leaves and Harry leans forward as Blaise takes a seat opposite him.

"Why are you sad?" He asks flatly.

"I am not."

He doesn't look sad either, he looks comfortable and serious but unbothered. Harry knows better. The magic is still so heavy on his shoulders. Harry takes a deep breath. *Guard the secrets, farzandam.*

"My magic is weird, right? You know that about me, so you know when I tell you that I can ... feel how heavy your vow feels to you right now, like its burdening you, that I'm telling the truth." Harry pauses and stares into Blaise's reddish brown eyes. "You don't want to do this. I can tell. So tell me why you're suggesting something you don't want to do."

Blaise lets out a sigh. He takes the box out of Harry's hand and holds it gently.

"The *Donas de Fuera* do not court," he says quietly, stroking a finger against the ruby eyes with tremendous reverence.

"What?"

"We do not court," Blaise looks up at them both, eyes bright. "We do not give courting gifts and we do not life-bond."

"I don't understand," Harry frowns. "We've been fake courting -,"

"And I have never given you a gift because we do not court. We guard our magic closely," Blaise says softly. "We are not wixen, not as other wixen are. It is why they call the Contessa half blooded."

"You have to know I would always keep your secrets, you do know that, right?" Harry stares at Blaise who nods solemnly. "Then what are you?"

Blaise smiles.

"I am *Donas de Fuera*," he says quietly. "I am of the Sweet Blood."

"I don't know what that means," Harry says.

"No one does," Theo says. "Some people say the secret their people is that they are half-fae, half-daemon, or perhaps Selkie born but ... no one knows."

"And I will not tell you," Blaise smiles at his friend fondly.

"Fucking spoilsport," Theo mutters and Blaise genuinely smirks. Harry feels the burden in his shoulders lift slightly.

"Then answer my question," Harry taps the box. "Why does this burden you?"

"Because I am a consort shield and the son of the Contessa and her vows and mine now require me to give something I was not ready to give," Blaise looks down at the pin sadly. "This was destined for someone, I don't know who yet, but it wasn't you, Harry."

"Who is it meant for?" Harry asks. "If you don't court or life-bond?"

"Does this mean there are no weddings within your clan?" Theo asks, sitting down next to Harry. "You never told me that."

"Not in the way you think of them," Blaise shakes his head. "Sometimes, two great families in the clan might decide to align themselves and their bloodlines, but this is arranged when we are children and we are raised alongside that person, growing up with them, becoming their friend, knowing and understanding them before the alliance is made official."

"And that isn't a life-bond?" Harry frowns.

"Life bonds share magic," Theo explains softly. Harry gives him a sharp look and presses a thought through the bond.

Do fidelity bonds share magic?

No one knows, Theo presses his leg against Harry's firmly. Harry knows it's much easier for Theo to send words to Harry when they're touching or when the bond is alive around them. Harry gets it. The words imply something much more, it's a soul bond after all. *Shared soul*.

“And ... your people ... your clan, they don’t share magic then?” Harry asks, feeling like he’s at a great risk of saying the wrong thing and accidentally being very stupidly offensive.

“No,” Blaise nods solemnly. “I do not have an arranged marriage inside the clan. Therefore, like other children of my clan, I have been raised to know that I never need marry or even think about it as other wixen do, that I am free from that and my only duty is to my bloodline and to my Contessa. I am free to love and take partners and lovers as I please my whole life long.”

“What of children?” Theo whispers.

“If I made them and they were *Donas de Fuera* then they would find their place inside the clan,” Blaise shrugs. “If a child is *Donas de Fuera* then we see it in their eyes at birth.”

“That’s why you don’t life-bond or share your magic with someone,” Theo mutters, staring at his friend. “Because the nature of your magic means that each individual *Donas de Fuera* has a unique iteration of your clan magic that should be guarded.”

Blaise nods and smiles at Theo.

“Then what does this *really* mean?” Harry frowns, pointing at the pin in Blaise’s hand.

“In the clan we say that we will protect the hearts of our family. So if I find someone who holds my whole heart, even if it is not forever, then I am to give them this token.” Blaise says. There’s an oddly eager expression on his face. “So everyone knows they are under my protection.”

“So this ... this is meant for your first love?” Harry says quietly.

“Nothing so trite, or would not Theodore have one?” Blaise snorts and Theo blushes, crossing his arms in front of himself and fixing his friend with an expression that Harry thinks is somewhere between exasperation and fondness. “No, it is not usually not given until we are older. When we have our own establishments so that we can say ...” Blaise takes a deep breath. “So we can say that we have our own power to protect our chosen person. That the clan has made us powerful, has grown us, and now we have chosen to take someone under our protection. Then the clan honours that because they believe ... we are ready.”

“It’s a rite of passage,” Theo says, as if the truth is dawning on him. Harry looks at him sharply, trying to understand. “The clan recognises your independence and supports it by celebrating your choice to protect your chosen partner.”

“Yes,” Blaise looks relieved to hear Theo say it. “Exactly. We do not need to be bonded to another with magic. We choose and are respected for it.”

Harry tries not to look at Theo. If Blaise thinks life-bonds are a kind of bondage, what the hell would he think of a soul bond? Even as he thinks it, Harry feels Theo’s hand gently finding his, linking their fingers together. He turns to look at Theo, who has sat abruptly down beside him. His eyes are very silver. He feels the soft warmth of Theo’s love and

remembers suddenly, Theo's words from last Christmas: *the fidelity bond is not bondage, it is safety*. Harry takes a deep breath and tries to focus on Blaise.

"I don't understand everything here but I get ... I get that it means a lot to you," Harry says quietly. "And you're giving up doing it right, in the way you want to, so you can keep me and Theo safe."

"I am not giving it up, the symbol can be given many times in a lifetime and the Clan will celebrate just as much when I give it a second time, it is ... it is only difficult. Personally." Blaise closes his eyes for a beat and when he opens them, they are very red. "Pureblood children dream of courtship gifts and a promise of a life bond. Muggle children dream of white weddings and romance and first dates and -,"

"Red roses," Harry shoots Theo a small smile. Theo blushes. With a jerk of discomfort, Harry wonders if a promise of a life bond is what Theo dreams of. *Is our soul bond not enough for him?* "So your clan dream of this?"

"Of making the declaration, of giving the symbol," Blaise delicately takes the box from Harry and opens it slowly. There is such longing in his eyes. "Of receiving the congratulations of the Clan, of introducing the chosen partner to them, there's usually a lot of food ..."

"Well, you are Sicilian," Theo mutters. Blaise smirks at him.

"Sounds fun," Harry says softly. "Sounds like the kind of thing you shouldn't have to give it up."

"I'm not giving it up," Blaise closes the box reverently and squares his shoulders. "I'll have it one day, even if it's not ... as it should be. The Contessa speaks for the *Donas de Fuera* and she has authorised this for me, this ... small deception on my part for your sake."

"How did she do that?" Harry frowns. Blaise and his mother exchanged no words on the platform. Blaise smiles tightly.

"We discussed this would be a possible outcome," Blaise says. "We agreed it would be ... acceptable."

Harry's heart clenches for a moment, thinking what a difficult conversation that must have been for Blaise to have for with his Mum. Harry feels like he's got a good measure of the Contessa - she is sharp and wise and never, ever raises her voice but she also is obviously ridiculously proud of Blaise. He imagines that a Mum like that would probably look forward to the first time Blaise gave his trinaeria away as much as Blaise clearly does.

"But you wish that the first time you gave your symbol it was to the right person at the right time," Harry supplies. "That it wasn't a lie."

Blaise takes a slow breath out. His shoulders slump and his eyes become less red. He rubs his forehead in an uncharacteristically distressed motion. Theo is staring at him like he's never seen him before.

“I do wish that,” he says quietly and his eyes drift over to Theo. “But not as much as I wish us all to survive.”

Blaise and Theo stare at one another for a long time. Not for the first time, Harry wonders how Blaise and Theo learned to say so much to one another without even opening their mouths. Harry knows Theo better than anyone alive, probably, but Blaise has known him longest and best. Finally, the two of them break their gaze and Theo fixes his silver eyes on Harry.

“Wear it,” Theo says softly.

“What?” Harry stares at him. “That seems like the opposite of what I should be doing.”

“I mean it, Harry, take it.”

“It seems to me that I should be telling Blaise to save this for the right person and that we’ll find another way to have a fake engagement -,”

“This is the only way my clan does this,” Blaise says quietly. “So this is the only route.”

“Yeah, but *I’m* not from your clan,” Harry says emphatically.

“It doesn’t matter,” Blaise’s voice is stoic. “This is how we do it.”

“Yeah but what if - what if I gave you something?” Harry thinks desperately. “Just for the time being to symbolise *my* fake commitment to you and then we - we can do this later. If we have to.”

Harry realises he really, really doesn’t want to take this away from Blaise. It feels cruel, especially because of the bond he and Theo have. *It would be like lying to him twice over.* Harry knows there are secrets to keep and the fidelity bond is one of the deepest, but he doesn’t want to belittle Blaise’s sacrifice. Not if he can help it.

“What could you give me?” Blaise asks.

“A ring,” Theo says quietly. Harry whips his head around to stare at him. “Or some kind of token.”

“Are you fucking kidding?” He whispers. “You wanted to stab Shafiq because she gave me a bloody *pin*!”

Blaise snorts with laughter. Theo smiles softly and grabs Harry’s hand.

“This is different,” he says. “It’s not real.”

“Yeah, and we’re like, only sixteen, if it was real, Remus would fucking kill me,” Harry mutters rubbing his forehead. Everyone seems to keep forgetting that he has two parents who he just *knows* would lose their shit over Harry getting engaged, if their reaction to the fidelity bond is anything to go by. There’s also the fact that he’s an absolute fucking mess, too, and

the very thought of it makes him feel nastily sick. “Right, a token ... I’ll have to write to Gringotts and get them to send something out of the vault.”

And tell Griphook so he doesn’t tear me a bloody new one for getting engaged. Harry stomach flips with nausea at the thought. He doesn’t know much about anything today, it seems, but he absolutely knows he is definitely not ready to be engaged to *anyone*.

“You don’t have to,” Theo’s voice is low. “The Black magic has created rings for you in the past.”

“It has?” Blaise eyes widen.

“Wait until you see him fight with it,” Theo’s voice is like silk. Harry squeezes his hand in warning and gives him a stern glare.

“*Stop flirting,*” he hisses. Theo only smirks and shakes his head.

“You know when you have a conversation in parseltongue it is utterly obnoxious?” Blaise drawls, eyebrows raised. “Give everyone lessons or keep it to yourself.”

“Jealous?” Theo smirks.

“Endlessly,” Blaise smiles with some of his usual sprezzatura, leaning back and spreading his arms out across the top of the seat. “So where’s my ring, Potter?”

“I need to ask it,” Harry says, looking down at his Black diamond. He feels the icy pull of it spreading up through his blood. He watches and listens as the diamond glows with a white light and it spreads along his skin.

“He’s glowing,” Blaise says. “This is new. Is this new?”

Harry ignores him and stares at the diamond. He hears the song of the ancient voices clamouring but now they solidify into one soft, familiar voice. *What do you require, honoured Mage?* Harry takes a deep breath and reaches for Blaise’s hand.

“Alright, are we going to talk about the strangeness of this?” Blaise mutters, letting him. “No, of course not, how foolish of me.”

“Just wait,” Theo grins slowly.

Harry looks down at Blaise’s hand and thinks about everything Blaise has come to mean to him since they took the bond last Christmas. He thinks of the weight of his consort shield bond between his shoulders, he thinks of the voice of Blaise’s magic when he was in the cage, the yellow satin ribbon of it, a song that sounds like waves and smells like blood and almonds. *Stay alive*, that voice had said. He thinks of Blaise pestering him in the Castello in Rome, forcing him to learn Italian badly, playing football together in the sunny courtyard, making jokes after all their exams and dragging Harry around Rome to distract him from missing Theo. He thinks of the way that Blaise would sit next to Harry at breakfast every morning with his many potions and see the bags under Harry’s eyes. How he would

wordlessly push an espresso towards him and then silently hand him the sports section of the muggle newspapers.

Who is this Sweet-blooded child to you? The Black Prince whispers in Harry's mind. *What do you want for him?*

Sweet-blooded. That was how Blaise had described himself, as of the Sweet Blood. Harry has no idea what it means.

A friend, Harry whispers back inside his mind. *He is our friend. We will acknowledge him.*

There is a clamour of joy inside the Black magic and Harry feels like a million strong voices are rushing to the surface of his skin. White light lifts off Harry's ring like a dust of snow and settles over Blaise's fingers. Blaise takes a sharp breath as the light accumulates on the finger next to his carnelian ring. There is a little spark and suddenly, there is a ring there. Harry smiles to see it. It's a silver band, like all of the black rings, but it doesn't have a large diamond or the insignia of the House of Black like Magnus' and the twins'. Instead, it takes the shape of a small, silver raven head, just like the raven heads on the clasps of the Black Lordship robes that Harry wore to the Wizengamot, with tiny black diamonds for eyes. Harry touches it and feels a familiar magic chiming in his ring, the distant sound of friendly laughter.

"It's ... flawless," Blaise whispers, staring at the ring. "What finger should I wear it on?"

"Wixen do a mirror of the Lordship ring," Theo softly touches Harry's black diamond. "So the first finger on your left for an engagement."

"That's probably better," Harry rubs his face and leans back. "God, it's *so weird* to say engaged."

"It is," Blaise agrees cheerfully, swopping the ring to his left hand. "We'll have to get used to it."

It's a sudden memory, it comes out of nowhere, it knocks Harry completely backwards inside his mind, reeling:

Cedric and Harry are kissing in the Quidditch stands in early, the summer night is warm and delicious and Cedric tastes like apples.

"Boyfriend," Cedric whispers against his lips. "I like the sound of it."

"I think it sounds weird," Harry admits hesitantly, not ready to explain why. Vernon's words and insults fly around his head.

"It's not weird," Cedric smirks. "When I graduate and we're both Professional seekers we'll be seeker boyfriends."

"Still weird," Harry laughs, feeling dizzy with possibility. A future where he gets to play quidditch and have Cedric is too fantastical to be real.

“Seeker fiancée’s, seeker husbands -,”

“Definitely weird!” Harry shoves him playfully.

“We’ll have to get used to it,” Cedric laughs, catching Harry for another kiss.

“I don’t think I can just *get used* to saying ‘I’m engaged’ when I’m not, Blaise.” Harry snaps, some of his mounting worry leaking into his voice because he’d forgotten that memory but now it’s back and he can almost smell broom handles and taste apples. Theo is looking at him with a slight frown. “This is, *by far*, the most fucking surreal pretend shit I’ve ever had to do, and that is saying something.”

“Oh yeah?” Blaise tilts his head to the side. “Not hiding the fact that you’re the son of Sirius Black all your life?”

“Yeah, because I wasn’t pretending to be *engaged* to my Dad!”

“Then say promised,” Theo says quietly. “After all, you have promises between you.”

Harry looks at Blaise who smiles and nods. *Promises to protect Theo*. It helps a lot to refocus, to remember this is the only reason he’s doing this, to keep Theo safe. He can’t think of anything he wouldn’t do for that reason. He tries to take a deep breath but it doesn’t quite work. *Because Cedric was my boyfriend and he’s dead*. But there’s nothing Harry can do about that and they’re going back to Hogwarts and Theo needs to be kept safe.

“Yeah,” Harry says eventually, voice taut. “Yeah, I guess I can say that.”

Theo nods and looks at Blaise.

“Can we have a minute?” Theo asks.

Blaise eyes become sharp and he stares at the door thoughtfully.

“You must be quick,” he says. “Hopefully no one will notice you’re in here alone.”

“Understood,” Theo says. Blaise leaves, and as soon as he steps out of the door, Theo pounces. Harry is being kissed within a second of his life and the memory flooding up through the bond to meet him is completely unsurprising. It’s them, lying in the grass at Fabiola’s cottage, speaking the words of their vows to one another. *I protect what protects me*.

“Theo ...” Harry pulls away, sparks gathering where their lips meet, sweet and sharp. He feels anxiety mounting but doesn’t know if he has the words for it. “I don’t know if I can do this, Theo.”

“Do what?” Theo frowns in concern. “Blaise is right, this would be totally normal if you were courting -,”

“It’s not *normal* to me!” Harry says fiercely. It’s not fair, the world is moving too fast and no one has ever told him how he’s supposed to feel about all this shit and his new dad, his *tad*,

Remus, has had to flee the country and the last boy he talked about these words with was Cedric and Cedric is dead. "I never - Christ, Theo, I never even thought I would get to go on a *date* with someone let alone even think about -,"

"Harry -,"

"I'm *sixteen* and Tom wants me dead and he fucking *killed Cedric* and I don't even know if I'm going to have a future -,"

"Harry, its okay -," Theo grabs his hands as Harry begins to flick his wrist band for him. "Just breathe, okay? Count backwards."

Harry does, taking three slow breaths. *I'm fake engaged. Cedric was my boyfriend but he's dead and now I'm fake engaged.* The deep breaths don't quite work.

"Ninety nine," Theo whispers, brushing his lips against Harry's forehead as if he can kiss away the words inside his skull. Harry sort of wishes he would. He doesn't want to be thinking about Cedric but it's all there, playing on a reel inside his head. "Ninety eight, ninety seven ... keep breathing, Beloved."

Harry tries not to shiver when Theo calls him that and instead, just bites him slowly on his bottom lip. Theo tugs on his hair in response and it's Harry's turn to hear Theo's thoughts. *I love you so fucking much, I will love you until the sun implodes -*

"I know," Harry whispers, resting his forehead against Theo's. "Would ... would Apollonius have arranged a courtship for you this year?"

"Yes, it's likely."

Harry doesn't need to ask who it would have been. *Daphne, obviously.* He doesn't feel weird about it, only tired.

"Severus and Regulus did six courtship gifts by the end of Regulus' sixth year," Harry whispers, the timing of it all churning in his mind. "He would have been seventeen when they were ... y'know, if they had got to seven. Mr and Mrs Weasley got married as soon as they left school. My Mum and James got married when they were nineteen."

"Yes."

"That ... that sounds normal to you?"

"Yes," Theo's eyes are cloudy, like thunderstorm clouds on a rainy day. "Apollonius was unusual in being unmarried for so long but my mother was married to him the year after she graduated. It's ... common. Especially in the Sacred Twenty Eight. "

And the Notts invented the Sacred Twenty Eight. They're the most Sacred-Twenty-Eight of them all. The trouble is, Harry was raised in a cupboard and got most of his lessons on romance from muggle TV. A combination of Grange Hill and Pride and Prejudice hasn't prepared him for this.

“It’s ... too young.” Harry’s words feel like they are made of lead to speak. “For muggles. It’s ... it’s too young.”

It’s too young for me. I’m not ready. I might never be ready.

“How old then? For muggles?” Theo’s voice is so tender but Harry still winces, because his mind is already twisting it into a question, even if it’s not what Theo meant: *How long will you make me wait for you?*

“I dunno, not until after university, mostly,” Harry says awkwardly. “So, like, I guess ... twenty four? Twenty-five?”

“Okay,” Theo whispers.

Deep down, Harry knows that it doesn’t matter. He could say muggles got married at a hundred and Theo could say next year and it would change nothing. The notion that he can outlive Voldemort seems as far away as the stars.

Not in the stars but in yourselves, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind.

He glances up to the box she’s nestled in next to Theo’s luggage. He shakes his head softly. Harry is too afraid to ask if Theo is disappointed, but he forces himself to say something, *anything*, to explain. All he can think of, however, is that the last boy he used these words with (*boyfriend, fiancée, husband*) is dead and buried and had the loveliest hazel eyes.

“I don’t ...” Harry takes a breath.

“Say the worst thing,” Theo breathes and Harry closes his eyes, grateful for permission. Harry doesn’t understand it, this sudden swell of grief that has ripped the floor out from underneath him so he leans forward and lets Theo kiss him again. Harry sighs into it and, almost in relief, thinks of Cedric laughing, saying “*Seeker fiancée, seeker husband.*” Theo pulls away gently and lets out a long breath. When he opens his silver eyes, Harry is amazed by the depth of understanding in them. Harry blinks back tears.

“I see,” Theo whispers.

“I don’t ... I don’t know if I even *want* any of that stuff, Theo,” he chokes out.

“Oh.”

He wants to ask Theo if this stuff matters to him, if he wants to get married, if he even cares about any of it, but the words are stuck in his mouth. Cedric had dreams for the future, labels and names and life bonds and Cedric’s dead. It feels like if Theo tells him, Harry will infect those dreams with his fucked-up-ness and then Theo will die, just like Cedric did.

“Harry,” Theo’s voice draws his attention. His grey eyes are completely unreadable. “My life and my secrets.”

Harry collapses against his shoulder in relief. *He loves me. Even if we want different things in the future, he loves me now.*

“This is going to be a difficult year, isn’t it?” Harry sighs, desperate to move the conversation on. He’s immensely grateful when Theo lets him.

“Have you ever had an easy one?” Theo says sarcastically.

Harry laughs and there’s a knock on the door.

“Jump apart!” Ron mutters, squeezing his way in. “There’s stuff I don’t need to see.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Harry scoffs, but Theo does pull away slightly, untangling their hands. The others filter back in and Harry thinks that Theo is completely right. He’s never had an easy year at Hogwarts. Which, in a weird way, makes this all completely normal. At least, that’s what Harry tries to tell himself as he laughs at Ron squabbling with Hermione over cauldron cakes and smirks at Daphne’s curt bewilderment and Blaise’s languid response to Hermione’s rapid-fire questioning of him about the so-called engagement. Harry tries not to think about Cedric, tries to reassure himself that Theo is here, right now, and alive beside him and just because he loves Theo so much more than he loved Cedric does not mean everything will end the same way.

Not in the stars but in ourselves, Harry repeats, focusing on the feeling of Theo’s warm knee pressed against his. *Not in the stars but in ourselves*.

Chapter End Notes

"A chi importa?" - Italian - "But who cares?"

"il tesoro mio" - Italian - my treasure

All for one

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

Three chapters this week! Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

This time: Theo and Daphne have a talk.

Next time: Harry does not enjoy the feast.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Griphook,

Just a quick one, I'm on the train but since I haven't floored you and I promised you would be my first floo if anything like this happened, I think you can work out what's going on. I had to keep Remus safe. Tell his Majesty for me, will you? Can't say more, I don't know how secure Hedwig will be with this.

May all your enemies have their faces eaten off by animagus dogs,

H.P.B.

“Aren't we going to talk about all this?” Granger asks as they are all pulling on their robes.

Theo is trying not to stare too much at Harry who is tucking his rune necklace away inside his shirt and starting to tie his tie. Theo takes a second to admire Harry, his white school shirt that makes him glow, and the gold cuff on his ear that he seems to have not taken off since the Goblin King gave it to him. It's just one of the visible pieces of jewellery Harry's acquired over time. There's the silver bracelet his Sire gave him, invisibly connected to his hidden Prince ring, that Theo can see glinting under the edge of his jumper sleeve. Theo can also see the silver shine of the chain of Harry's rune necklace on the back of his neck, the sparkle of the Black diamond where it bursts out of his finger. Harry catches him looking and sends him the flicker of a wink. Theo's stomach turns. *Bloody hell, he should wink more.*

“I thought all we'd *done* was talk about it,” Weasley groans, which is true. It's been a long journey and not just because it's a train from London to the highlands.

"Yeah, I don't think I can talk about it anymore," Harry mutters. His hands are shaking again, he's struggling to tie his tie and Theo steps forward.

"Here," he says quietly, nimbly doing it for him.

"Thanks," Harry says, quietly meeting his eye as Theo pushes the tie-up to his throat.

"You're welcome," Theo says in a quiet voice. "You look perfect."

"*So do you,*" Harry hisses back, with a slow grin.

"It's obnoxious when you do that," Blaise says loudly and Theo steps back, smirking to himself.

"No, I meant aren't we going to talk about how it is *fucking crazy* that people are just ... getting engaged and married so young?" Granger presses, pinning her prefect badge onto her robes.

"It is not crazy for those of us holding Wizengamot seats and significant wixen land," Theo finds himself snapping. He doesn't mean to, he knows that Granger grew up differently from him but it is incredibly frustrating. "We have fortunes to secure and an unmarried heir is potentially open to ... targeting."

"What does that mean?" Harry frowns. Theo feels his stomach tighten. He doesn't want to talk about courting practices with Harry if he can help it. He feels exactly how he did when he and Harry first began courting and never mentioned it; as if he's in very great danger of scaring Harry off with all of this and consequently Theo really wishes that none of this had ever come up. *But the Contessa wants to protect Remus Lupin, so here we are.*

"Compulsions, the imperius curse, love potions," Blaise shrugs. "Anything that could manipulate an heir and potentially allow an enemy coercive control of a future Wizengamot seat and the associated fortunes. It's been common practice in the Sacred Twenty Eight for generations."

"It's why courtship practises were established, so young heirs could publicly display their alignment with another House," Theo says, nodding at Blaise, hoping if he only puts forward neutral facts, Harry's obvious panic earlier won't be reignited. "It means that when they enter wixen society, they don't just have their own family's protection, they have the protection of another house too."

"So it's all about protecting wealth," Granger mutters darkly. "Even with magic we can't get away from fucking capitalism."

Theo's a little annoyed that he quietly agrees with her.

"Well, that explains why Griphook is so bloody interested in someone proposing to me," Harry mutters. Theo thinks that is probably an understatement. Harry's bank manager will probably roll over in relief when he receives the note from Hedwig that implies the protection of the Contessa. Harry's fortunes will be secure from predators.

“Makes me almost glad to be dirt poor,” Weasley smiles, clapping Harry on the shoulder. “No one’s going to poison me!”

“That you know of,” Granger says.

“Yeah, I might, just for laughs,” Harry grins.

“Piss off,” Weasley says, pushing him gently. It seems to help Harry relax and he pushes him back. Theo and Daphne catch one another eye, completely at a loss to understand this strange, physical jostling that seems to denote affection.

“We must maintain the boundaries that have been established,” Blaise says, ignoring them both. “We stick to the story. Harry and I are engaged -,”

“Promised,” Harry winces. “I can’t ... I can’t say engaged.”

Theo tries to keep his face stoic even as Daphne glances at his expression. It was a surprise, to be confronted by how all of this has stirred up Harry’s grief for Diggory, but not shocking. Theo tries to put aside his sharp feelings of inadequacy when he recalls Diggory’s smooth smile as he said “*Seeker boyfriend, seeker husband.*” Harry’s reticence and fear must be perfectly natural, Theo only wishes he could give Harry the time he clearly needs. He wishes for the anonymity and privacy of their secret relationship when he could move as slowly as Harry needed to, but the world has caught up with them and is pushing everything forward, much too fast, and Theo cannot help but resent the whole fucking thing.

“Promised then,” Blaise carries on smoothly. “Then Counsellor Lupin is protected and so are Harry and Theo. We will use first names in public -,”

“We will?” Weasley frowns.

“No, they will,” Daphne points curtly between Harry and Blaise. “You are still Weasley.”

“Good,” Weasley looks relieved but oddly, Granger looks at Daphne with disappointment in her eyes.

“Harry and I will eat meals together, we will present a united political front and you will all behave with decorum around us that is befitting friends of this type of alliance,” Blaise says, sounding like his mother. “That is all we need to do.”

“All we need to do?” Granger rolls her eyes. “Just collectively lie to everyone?”

“So nothing out of the ordinary,” Weasley says, clapping his hands together and then pointing at Harry and Theo. “So vault this, then?”

“What?” Theo looks at Blaise but he looks confused too.

“That’s what we say about secrets to do with me,” Harry rolls his eyes. Granger frowns, looking suddenly uncomfortable that all of this is being spoken about. Theo is reminded, suddenly, that his presence in Harry’s life is only a year old. Granger and Weasley have been

keeping Harry's secrets a lot longer. *But none as deep as what we keep together, our bond.* "It's in the vault. Like Gringotts."

"Interesting," Daphne looks between Granger and Harry. "So if this is a vaulted secret, the truth of Harry and Theo, who knows it?"

"Us," Harry says curtly, gesturing around. "My guardsmen, my steward, my *Anzar*, my parent."

There are other people who know (*Snape, Narcissa, Dumbledore*) but they are not people who Daphne can know about. Theo can see why the vault metaphor is suitable. *Different secrets in different vaults, different levels of truth.*

"The Contessa knows," Blaise shrugs.

"She does?" Harry stares at him. Theo is not surprised.

"She knows everything," Blaise says.

"Luna knows," Weasley adds.

"Luna also knows everything," Harry mutters. Theo realises Harry is holding his hand, squeezing it tightly. It's making him anxious, Theo realises, having to talk about these secrets in this way, but it's also a sign of how much Harry is willing to trust Daphne and Blaise. From the way Granger is watching him carefully, checking for minute signals only she will understand, Theo wonders if it is more for her and Weasley's sake than Harry's. *He's asking his friends to trust my friends, at least with this.*

"I see," Daphne looks around at them slowly. Something's not quite right with her today, Theo thinks. She always holds herself rigidly, but there is always an ease to her movements. Today, she is stiff and she definitely wasn't like this when they left the Greengrass house that morning. "It is a large vault then."

"This is what happens when a Lord grows his court," Blaise says easily. Granger chokes.

"Excuse me?" She splutters. "Did we just arrive in the 15th Century? Harry doesn't have a *court!*"

"Historically speaking -," Blaise begins.

"I don't think this is the time," Theo says, giving Blaise a sharp look. If Granger is this opposed to pureblood courting traditions he cannot imagine how opposed she will be to the historical examples of Dark Lords' courts of rule. Blaise shrugs but Granger narrows her eyes at him. Theo stares steadily back.

"What the fuck is a court?" Harry frowns. "Is it like courting?"

"We're here," Ron peers out of the window before anyone can answer and squares his shoulders in his Gryffindor robes, his prefect badge on his chest. "Are we doing this?"

He looks significantly at Blaise and Harry's hands. Harry squeezes Theo's hand tenderly and Theo feels the flash of thought through the bond: *I love you*. Then Harry lets go and offers his right hand to Blaise. This is the modicum of displayed affection they have agreed upon on the long train ride to Scotland. It is the only thing Harry is comfortable with and even now, he looks like he would rather go ten rounds with the Dark Lord than be seen by the student body of Hogwarts walking hand in hand with the son of the Contessa.

"Yes, we are doing this," Blaise says quietly, glancing at Theo. "All in the vault. Together."

"All for one," Harry gives Granger a significant look. She smiles reluctantly and then lets her shoulders relax.

"And one for all," Granger finishes with a warm smile at Harry. Something has passed between them, something Theo doesn't understand but she is instantly less hostile, looking at Theo with less abrupt opposition and more weary acceptance. Theo is not insulted. He respects Granger, he accepts that she is Harry's sister and that Daphne enjoys her company and that Blaise finds her surprisingly funny. None of it means that Theo always likes her.

"What is *one for all*?" Theo asks.

"The Three Musketeers," Harry shoots Theo a thin grin. "A muggle book. You'd like it. We'll find you a copy."

"I have it," Daphne says. "*Tours pour un, un pour tous. Les Trois Mousquetaires* is wonderful."

"You've read it in French?" Granger frowns.

"That is the language it was written in," Daphne frowns back and Theo snorts. He knows how much Daphne detests reading translations.

"Sahara," Harry says, eyes twisting to where Sahara is in her box up on the luggage rack. He hisses in parseltongue and in a flash of green light, Sahara is wrapped around Harry's wrist, moving up to his neck with slow hisses and flickering into invisibility. They've made the same plan for Sahara this year as last year. She is Theo's at school in public but Harry can have her around invisibly whenever she likes.

"Of course, there is nothing even slightly worrying about having a deadly boomslang so close to my head," Blaise mutters.

"If you want to hold hands you'll get used to it," Harry shoots a look at Theo and rolls his eyes. Theo feels an overwhelming sense of his own value. For him, Sahara is as much a part of Harry as his hair or arm.

"*Mine*," Theo hisses softly in parseltongue under his breath and Harry grins, his smile becoming more genuine as he squares his shoulders.

"Let's get this over with," Harry says. They all step out and move down onto the dark platform. Weasley and Granger first, then Blaise and Harry, followed by Daphne and Theo.

Theo notices Daphne's breathing is uneven, her lips tightly pursed.

"Are you well?" Theo asked Daphne who nods stiffly. Theo realises that she is not. "What can I do?"

"I wish to find Astoria," she mutters.

"We can do that."

Theo watches his friend carefully. She certainly seems unsettled, less placid than usual. He wonders if Blaise has misjudged Daphne's reaction to the triacria, perhaps there is more feeling hidden beneath the surface of their usually calm and collected friend. They step out onto the platform and the cold night air. Almost immediately, it feels like every set of eyes on the platform is following Harry and Blaise. Various whispers reach Theo's ears.

"Did you see his hand? It's so fucked up -,"

"He's missing a finger!"

"Merlin, is that a tattoo?"

"He's got so. Many. Scars!"

Theo can't help but take a brief second to see Harry through their eyes. The scars on his left hand, still visible from when he surrendered the Black magic last Yule, are undoubtedly the worst ones to look at, even partially obscured by the tattoo, and every second of Professor Snape's careful rebuilding of the hand is evidenced in the scarring. Theo's glad that the scar around Harry's neck from Bellatrix's torture has faded a little in the last few weeks, but it's still there, a faint indent of the collar made of metal and stone above his white shirt.

"I heard he carried an *axe* to the Wizengamot -,"

"Are we even *allowed* weapons at school?"

Theo finds that his eyes are tracking things that aren't quite visible to the other students, the hints of them hidden under Harry's uniform. How there is a bulge under the fabric of Harry's right bicep where his basilisk fang is sheathed, how the hem of his right trouser leg snags slightly on the new hidden blade in its leather ankle strap hidden beneath it and how Harry's leather wand holster looks so attractive on his right wrist. Taking him all in as he is now, thinner than he should be but armed and adorned and wearing the marks of his battles all over his skin, Theo feels a thrill. *Thank fuck he's mine, Holy Odin he's so fucking beautiful.* He finds himself wishing that Harry could hear him through the bond, so he knows that even if people are talking about him, he's not alone. But Harry is not the only one who's being talked about.

"He's holding hands with Zabini!"

"Zabini fucks everyone -,"

"What happened to Potter and Granger?"

“He’s certainly moved on from Diggory fast ...”

“I thought Zabini was courting Greengrass?”

“Maybe she’s going out with them both...”

“Lucky!”

Theo shoots a look at Daphne but her mouth is drawn tighter together than he’s ever seen. He sees Astoria as they begin to walk up to the carriages pulled by the Thestrals and waves her over, hoping to subtly convey urgency. She frowns, tossing her chestnut hair over her shoulder, and breaks away from her younger friends to join them.

“Is this about the trinaeria?” Theo asks Daphne quietly. “Did you ... have expectations?”

Daphne gives him a stern, resentful look.

“I will not dignify that with a response.”

“Then why -?”

“Because I know what that pin means to him,” Daphne whispers back fiercely. “It is not right that he should give up what he has always wanted, the chance to prove himself to his clan and family -,”

“He hasn’t given it up,” Theo says urgently. “Harry didn’t take it, Daphne -,”

“It isn’t fair! If he has no desire to commit to another person like that, why should he?” Daphne continues on as if he hasn’t spoken. “ Why should anyone?”

“You don’t believe in commitment, Greengrass?” Granger asks, appearing beside them. “Ever?”

Daphne flinches but nods sharply. Daphne doesn’t seem to notice the mildly hurt expression on Granger’s face.

“But ... I thought what you all said about the - the Sacred Twenty Eight and heirs and all that -,”

Daphne twitches like Granger is a flea.

“Those are the traditional *expectations* of the Sacred Twenty Eight they are not compulsory!” Daphne cuts her off with a snap. “Marriages are historically alliances to oppress people, traditionally women, and to produce heirs. I have scores of cousins, the Greengrass family is vast, it crosses continents, we are not *vulnerable* like other families and I have a sister to be my heir! Since I do not need to, I will not force myself to conform to traditional romance just because people think I should.”

“Yes, I mean, yes, of course, I agree,” Granger splutters, her voice shrinking and her eyes looking slightly plaintive. She reaches out and tentatively strokes a hand down Daphne’s arm.

“But ... but what if - what if you meet someone and you, like, want to date ...?”

Theo almost winces. Clearly, Daphne’s flirtations have been effective. Granger is smitten. Daphne either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“Does loving someone mean I would stop being myself?” Daphne demands with surprising hostility. He glances at Astoria whose eyebrows have gently furrowed. Granger, however, looks positively crushed as Daphne ploughs ahead. “Would my wants and needs be subsumed into their desires, just because mine are less traditional? Do not pet me!”

Daphne jerks her arm away from Granger and Astoria comes closer.

“Please don’t touch her like that,” Astoria says, sounding the fiercest that she ever has, batting Granger’s hand away. “She doesn’t like it.”

Granger looks wounded, staring between Daphne and her little sister. Daphne is standing ramrod straight and completely unresponsive, as if she’s been put under a freezing spell. *This is not a good sign.* Theo carefully manoeuvres himself between Granger and Daphne.

“She doesn’t like to be touched like that, Granger,” he repeats. “Go and ride with the others.”

“Is she okay?” Granger whispers.

“There’s nothing wrong with being different,” Astoria says fiercely but that only makes Granger widen her eyes. Theo sighs heavily. He knows she won’t move without an explanation. He remembers his own questions over the summer and Daphne’s eagerness to brush past them: *is it neuro sensitivity or a kind of neurodiversity?*

“She has ... some additional needs,” Theo says, glancing at Daphne to see if it’s okay to be saying this but she seems to have entirely absented her own body. “Kindly leave her alone.”

“But this - this doesn’t make -,” Granger’s eyes widen as she notices the way that Daphne is holding her arms tautly across her body, her eyes distant. “Oh! You’re - she’s - it’s *autism*, right? That’s why she’s so smart -,”

Theo feels Daphne wince behind him and Astoria bristles. It’s just like Granger to speak without thinking. It’s one of the things Theo likes least about her.

“No, that’s not why and you can’t say that about her, it’s prejudiced!” Astoria says, her voice sharper and more deadly and for the first time ever, Theo sees a hint of her father in the youngest Greengrass. “Daphne got higher marks than everyone because she works the hardest!”

“I’m - I’m sorry, Greengrass,” Granger stammers, staring between Astoria and Theo. She looks bewildered and shamefaced but also keeps trying to catch Daphne’s eye, who stares with obvious obliviousness at the thestral. “I - I didn’t mean -,”

“Go and ride with the others,” Theo commands, as gently as he can bear to, since he knows his own tendency to curtness when it comes to Granger would only add tension to what is already a tense moment. Over Granger’s shoulder, he can see Blaise and Harry looking back

at them, both frowning. He catches Blaise's eye and jerks his head towards Daphne. Understanding flickers across Blaise's face. Of course, Blaise knows exactly what's happening. Once again, Theo is struck by just how deeply his two friends must know one another.

"Granger, join us!" Blaise calls, waving Granger over. As she turns to look at Blaise, Theo opens the door of the carriage for Daphne and she climbs in, without looking at Granger. Theo and Astoria follow, closing the door behind them.

"Daph?" Astoria asks quietly, sitting beside her sister but not close enough to touch her. "Do you ... do you want me to squeeze you?"

Daphne shakes her head, staring into space. She is squeezing her elbows so tightly, hugging her own body so close, that her knuckles are white. She looks like she is very close to rocking but is holding herself deliberately steady. Astoria looks at Theo a little helplessly.

"She's never like this anymore," Astoria whispers. "Daddy used to ... there's the magic that means she can be squeezed without being touched but she's not needed it, *we've* not needed it in ages -,"

Theo remembers what Daphne said when she used the Greengrass magic on him: *intense pressure upon the body can be helpful for children struggling with overstimulation.*

"The Greengrass magic," Theo looks down at the pearl ring on Astoria's finger. It's not an heirship ring, only a token of familial love like the Potter ring on Granger's finger but it's Granger's ring that gives him the idea. "Does your ring have the Greengrass magic?"

"Yes," Astoria twists it on her finger and shoots her suddenly non-verbal sister a worried glance. "But I ... I've never done it."

"Come here, let me help you," Theo says and Astoria quickly switches to his side as the carriage lurches forward. "Hold out your hand. Now, family magic is ... it's part of you. Do you know the word you need?"

"*Berhenti*," Astoria whispers. There is a small, greenish glow around the pearl.

"Very good," Theo nods. He tries to think of what his own heir magic feels like, how it is under his skin at all times, called only with a thought. He wishes, suddenly, that Harry was with them. Harry, who talks about magic like it is so innate and easy. He remembers what Apollonius told him when he gave him his Heir ring the first time: The Nott magic heals. *When you wish to heal, you must wish it sharply and firmly, as if you wish to heal your brother warrior on the field of battle.*

"I'm not good at this," Astoria whispers. "Not like Daph."

"What does the Greengrass magic do?" Theo asks quietly. "What does your father say?"

"It calms and contains," Astoria parrots, as every pureblood child can do about their family magic. "*Ketat serperti alar tedung.*"

“My Malay is not perfect but ... that means it ... tightens?”

“Tight as the cobra,” Astoria whispers.

“Right,” Theo nods. He looks at Daphne’s listless expression. “What does your father say about wielding the magic?”

“Call the strength of the cobra and let it run through your veins,” Astoria repeats.

“Then we shall do that,” Theo nods for her to raise her hand. Astoria does. “Ready? Wish for the strength to hold Daphne tight and safe, imagine the magic like the cobra around her, keeping her safe, alright?”

“Alright,” Astoria nods, her small hand trembling as she stares at her sister. “Just remember to breathe, like Daddy says, okay Daph? *Berhenti*.”

The green light glitters as it spools out of Astoria’s hand, encasing Daphne who, immediately, begins to breathe deeply, closing her eyes softly.

“It’s working!” Astoria whispers, her hand shaking.

“How do you feel?” Theo asks Daphne gently. She is taking slow breaths and seems much more relaxed. Her knuckles are gripping less tightly and her shoulders are dropping.

“Bit ... better ...” Daphne whispers without opening her eyes. “You knew.”

“I ... made an inference,” Theo says. “Is it helping?”

“Yes. You’re doing well, Tori,” Daphne opens her eyes and smiles at her sister so fondly, and then her eyes find Theo’s. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Theo turns to Astoria. “Are you well?”

“It’s hard,” Astoria frowns, little beads of sweat appearing on her forehead. “You’re all so good at magic.”

“What do you mean?” Theo asks. “We’re not all like Harry.”

“No, indeed,” Daphne mutters and Theo smiles. He’s glad her dry wit is returning.

“It’s not just Harry though ... he is strange,” Astoria frowns deeper, shaking her head as she stares at her ring. “Daph can use arithmancy like no one else, that’s what Daddy says. Blaise is so good with his heir magic it’s a bit scary, he’s like a real grown-up. You can cast with both hands *and* heal people with heir magic and you’re so clever at Potions.”

“Those are all things I learned,” Theo says quietly. “I learned to cast ambidextrously, I learned to wield my heir magic and my mother taught me how to excel in Potions. You can learn too.”

“I don’t know,” Astoria purses her lips thoughtfully. “Daddy says some wixen are just more powerful than others. I think you might just all be really powerful. Maybe that’s why you’re all friends.”

Theo has never considered that perhaps unconsciously, he didn’t just maintain a friendship with Daphne and Blaise for their *alleanza*. Perhaps he liked the power they displayed, the combination of academic prowess and unique ability. He has known, pretty much immediately since he began Hogwarts, that he is capable of working at a much higher level than his classmates in Potions and Charms. For Daphne, the same can be said in Arithmancy and whilst Blaise does not distinguish himself as uniquely academically gifted, Astoria is right. His inner resources, his capability with heir magic, makes him irregular. With Daphne and Blaise by his side, Theo has never felt as if his extraordinary skills made him strange, but maybe it was because, in their equally extraordinary company, they could all relish being ordinary with one another.

“Maybe,” Theo says.

“None of my friends are as powerful as you all,” Astoria shrugs.

“Power can be taught,” Theo thinks of Harry teaching even a third year like Dennis Creevey to produce the beginnings of a Patronus. “We can teach you to be powerful, Astoria.”

Astoria’s face is confused for a moment.

“I don’t know,” Astoria’s whole arm is shaking violently. “Maybe I don’t want to be powerful. It seems ... hard.”

Theo is silenced by her insight. He thinks of the burden Blaise has borne today because of the power he wields and the power the Contessa wields. He thinks of how power has brought Harry so much pain along with freedom. He thinks of Apollonius telling him to follow power, only. He thinks of what it cost his father. War changes everything. Being gifted is not simply an academic perk anymore, it’s no longer about getting the highest OWL scores or being taken more seriously in Slytherin. Now it’s about survival, for all of them. In some ways, Theo feels as if he’s been training for this his entire life, can hear Apollonius’ words ringing in his ears (*Good warriors expect a battle, Theodore*) but in other ways, he feels completely unprepared. He swallows heavily.

“You might be right,” he says.

“Which is why you do not have to be,” Daphne’s voice has returned to normal and she is looking at her sister with infinite love in her brown eyes. Theo understands. Daphne will be powerful for her. “You can let go now, Tori.”

“Good,” Astoria drops her hand in relief and looks out of the window. “We’re almost there.”

Theo moves across to sit beside Daphne, making sure he does not touch her.

“I am sorry,” he says quietly. “If what I said caused you discomfort.”

“It was not you,” Daphne sighs and tucks her hair behind her ears, much calmer and more lucid now the tingle of magic is dissipating through the air. “Coming off the train, it was ... overwhelming.”

“You are not usually overwhelmed by students and noise.”

“Not that,” Daphne shakes her head. “Their comments. The feeling that I was being ... noticed.”

“Ah.” Theo nods. Daphne is difficult not to notice, she is incredibly beautiful and dauntingly intelligent, she has a flood of interest from the highest academic achievers across many years of the school, but Daphne generally is unaware or uninterested in that. Being the source of rumours, of gossip, being surrounded by intrigue, that is a different thing entirely.

“Things will be different this year,” Daphne says.

Theo considers their lives for the last five years. Whilst Theo’s last year was full of disruption, so much disruption he is starting to expect it, Daphne’s had not been.

“I am sorry,” Theo says.

“It is not your doing,” Daphne’s eyes are clearer than they were, focusing on Theo for the first time since they got off the train. “I perhaps had not considered how Blaise’s public alignment with Harry would impact me in this way.”

“You have been aligned with him privately for so long ...”

“Yes,” Daphne’s face tightens slightly. “I’d not thought about how it would feel having so many people talking like this ...”

Theo thinks about how, at every moment of the last year, Daphne and Blaise have been standing beside one another. Best friends, one another’s solace and first floo, more deeply connected than most traditionally courting or married couples Theo knows. They’ve never been outspoken about their arrangement but they have never had to hide it either. Now Blaise will likely have to hide both his association with Fred Weasley and his relationship with Daphne.

“He will always be yours in the ways that matter to you,” Theo says. “And Granger ...”

“She’s sweet,” Daphne gives him a small but bleak smile. “But I was honest with her. I truly have no interest in courtship.”

“I doubt she does either,” Theo says, giving Granger the benefit of the doubt because it’s what Harry would ask. “Otherwise she wouldn’t have ended things with Ginny Weasley or protested so fucking loudly against Harry and Blaise and, well, me.”

“Then why would she -?”

“She fancies you,” Astoria says bluntly. “She was trying to work out if you’d go out with her or if you’re totally against it. Right, Theo?”

“Yes,” Theo tries not to smirk. “I don’t think she was trying to criticise you. She seemed saddened by the notion that she is not yet close enough to use your first name on the train. She was trying to gauge your interest.”

“Oh.” Daphne frowns as she looks between her sister and Theo. “I wonder why she didn’t just *ask* me if I liked her.”

Theo smiles privately. Daphne is subtle and cunning and the most emotionally intelligent person he knows except when it comes to her own romantic life. Their brief liaison in third year was characterised by extreme bluntness on both sides and Theo knows that is how Daphne prefers her romantic partners to communicate. It seems to be at odds with Granger, who for such a verbose person, turns into a slightly stammering wreck around Daphne.

“Because she’s nervous,” Astoria says flatly, her emotional insights continuing to abound. Theo nods again.

“She is a classically symptomatic Gryffindor - outspoken on every matter except her own desires. Including many that do not concern her,” Theo adds, as a bitter afterthought.

Daphne gives him a soft look and Astoria pulls a book out of her bag, promptly ignoring them.

“She loves her brother,” she says quietly. “I would do the same if you came into Tori’s life so abruptly. She does not trust you.”

Theo sighs. Not for the first time he wished he had a sibling so he could understand this properly. There is no one in his life who he protects with the same self-assured confidence in his own opinion as Granger does Harry or Daphne does Astoria.

“Unlike her, I trust that she will not harm Harry,” Theo mutters mulishly.

“That matters little when she knows that you do not trust her to make good decisions,” Daphne says, wisely. Theo feels a flicker of discomfort. It is true that whilst he trusts Granger loves and will always protect Harry, whilst he trusts in her intelligence and sharp wit, he does not necessarily trust her opinion.

“She is very ... muggle,” Theo says. Daphne raises her eyebrow.

“I may struggle to grasp social cues on occasion but even I know you can’t say that,” she says flatly.

“I do not mean I don’t trust her *because* she is a muggle, I mean that our different upbringings do not induce us to see eye to eye, especially about Harry,” Theo says evenly. *Sometimes, she looks at me like I’m everything that’s wrong with the wixen world.*

“You think she doesn’t want you to complete your courting gifts with Harry?” Daphne asks. “Completion would imply intent to marry -,”

“Harry’s not ready for that,” Theo snaps. He doesn’t mean to, but he cannot get Diggory’s words from Harry’s memory out of his mind, all of the words that Theo has carefully skirted

around with Harry, particularly boyfriend, Diggory had them all first and it feels absurdly unfair. *Odin above, can I not be given the fucking opportunity to give him good memories associated with some of these words?* “Muggles, it seems, do not marry until they are much older.”

“How old?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Seems sensible,” Daphne shrugs.

“I did not say it wasn’t.”

Theo doesn’t care about time or age. What he cares about is that it’s taken so fucking long, a whole year, for Harry to even get to the point where he can accept that he is actually in a new relationship after the death of Diggory, that he and Theo are courting. All of this could scare him off and Theo will not have it.

“The adult brain doesn’t finish forming until twenty-five,” Daphne muses. “It seems imminently suitable to me.”

“Have you been reading more muggle psychology books?” Theo smirks.

“I find them illuminating,” Daphne looks out of the window. “It is a field of wixen research that is sorely lacking. So will you wait to give your last courting gift, then?”

“Wait for what?”

“Until you’re twenty-five? Until Harry’s ready?”

Theo doesn’t answer. He knows those are two different questions, even if Daphne doesn’t realise it.

“I don’t know what I will do,” he sighs. He realises, abruptly that he has spoken the truth. Daphne raises her eyebrow.

“That is unlike you.”

“Yes,” Theo swallows hard. For some reason, he cannot stop thinking of the Nott Lordship ring, sitting cold and alone in the Nott vault, waiting for him to claim it. Blaise has his clan to guide him, Daphne has her own desires and a father who would do anything for her, and each of his closest friends knows their own expectations on this but Theo feels suddenly at sea. He tries to put it into words. “Before Harry, I always assumed Apollonius would arrange a match for me and that would be that.”

“Yes,” Daphne’s voice becomes distant. When she looks at him, her eyes are fond. “You know, father suggested it, last summer at the end of fourth year. He said he’d had interest from your father and if I liked you, he would discuss it with your father.”

“Hmm.” Apollonius never even asked him if he had any preferences, (if he had, Theo might have been able to tell him that a witch would never do) but it is unlikely Apollonius would have cared. All he would have seen was the political alliance. “What did you say?”

“I told him the truth,” Daphne smiles. “That I liked you well enough for a friend and ally but I would never conform to the expectations of the Sacred Twenty Eight.”

“I never imagined I wouldn’t,” Theo says flatly. All his childhood, it has been drilled into him that he is to be a certain way, a perfect son of the Sacred Twenty Eight, a warrior, a Nott, a Death Eater. “Apollonius’ plans were always unavoidable until ...”

Harry.

“Well. You are not a Death Eater. You are not engaged to be married to me. You are infinitely better off for both,” Daphne says with a smile. Theo smiles back shortly.

He wishes he could tell Harry, flat out, that he doesn’t care about pureblood traditions around engagement but Theo feels hesitant. He realises, with a sense of unease, that he doesn’t *know* if he cares or not. He has never had occasion to question or ask himself, he has always been expected to court and marry and now the path is shrouded with unknowns. Theo sighs. There is a part of him that is full of so many questions, he doesn’t *know* what he wants for his own life in this new world where he is fatherless and markless and steering his own course by his own stars and designs. Yet he knows one thing for sure, the fidelity bond warms in his chest when he thinks of it: *whatever happens, whatever we do, always Harry.*

“I suppose some changes are good,” he says uncertainly.

“And some are unavoidable, especially in a war,” Daphne sighs heavily, her mind still clearly mulling over how different everything will be for her this year. “I am not particularly enamoured with change.”

Theo watches her cautiously. He cannot stop things from changing, he cannot stop the war from coming, and they both have people to watch for and protect. He thinks of what he can do to help his friend at this moment and runs through his mental list of what has always helped Daphne talk in the past and seem at her most comfortable.

“Tell me about *Les Trois Mousquetaires*,” he says. He cannot stop the world from changing or halt the feeling of sharp encroaching darkness but he can do this; he can listen to his friend. He is gratified to see Daphne’s slow smile as she begins to speak.

Granger is loitering by the steps with Harry, rubbing her fingers against her prefect badge. As soon as she sees them, she leaps forward.

“I’m sorry, Greengrass,” Granger blurts out, her eyes darting between Theo and Daphne. Astoria stands at Daphne’s side and folds her arms, glaring up at Granger and looking so perfectly like her older sister in a fury that Theo can’t help but smirk. “I’m really, really sorry, I didn’t mean - I said the wrong thing and I -,”

"We don't need to discuss this, Granger," Daphne says, glancing to Theo. "Shall we?"

"Of course," Theo nods, determined to take his cue from her. He gestures for them to walk up the steps.

"No, wait, please, just let me explain ..." Granger takes a deep breath in and twists her fingers together. Harry seems very focused on his sister. Theo wonders what Granger could possibly have to say that warrants this kind of sudden, emotional support. "I ... I was tested a lot. Before Hogwarts."

Daphne pauses and raises an eyebrow at Granger. She seems to quail slightly but when she looks at Harry, standing silent and steady beside her, it seems to encourage her. Pulling her shoulders back, Granger goes on.

"I didn't talk. I was ... well, I was mute until I was about four," Granger's voice is a bit wobbly. "So Mum and Dad worried, they had me tested for everything, they thought I was autistic too but I just ... y'know. Mum jokes that I just wanted to talk perfectly."

"Pretty on brand," Harry says softly and Granger smirks gratefully at him.

"Then when I went to school I wasn't ... well, I'm not good with people, I didn't have any friends." Granger shakes her cloud of dark hair. "So they kept testing me, so I learned as much as I could about it, I wanted to know, you see, to know why I was so odd -,"

"You were a witch," Harry nudges Granger gently on the shoulder and she smiles tremulously at him.

"And you were a wizard," she says softly. Theo sees it then, one of the true reasons that Granger and Harry's friendship is so enduring. He imagines them both, two odd, friendless children unaware of their magical prowess. He realises, for the first time, how incredibly lonely it must feel for muggleborn children, to bear the weight of their magic and their perceived strangeness alone. He remembers the word that always produces such violence in Harry: *freak*. He wonders if Granger ever heard it too.

"But anyway, I tried to learn a lot about autism so that's why I ..." Granger's voice runs out and she looks at Daphne pleadingly. "I didn't mean it in a bad way, or that you don't work hard, I do get it, I really do. I mean, I'm not autistic but I just ... I would never think badly of you for this, Greengrass, you - you have to know -,"

"I do know, Granger," Daphne says and Granger takes a great sighing breath of air. Harry smiles. "Shall we go inside?"

They walk up the steps, Astoria walking between Theo and Harry.

"Harry," she whispers. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Tor," Harry says, eyes fixed on the doorway. Theo tries to hide a smirk when he notices how Astoria's face blushes with delight at her new nickname. "What's up?"

"Does Daphne's no wand treaty mean that we can be friends?"

“Aren’t we already friends?” Harry grins. “After all, you named your gecko Garak, that was my idea.”

“Um, yeah, I suppose,” Astoria’s smile is huge. “But ... we keep secrets for each other, right? Like, you won’t tell anyone about Daph and I won’t tell anyone ...”

Wisely Astoria says nothing but her eyes slip ahead to where Blaise and Weasley are waiting by the doors. Theo knows what her lack of words implies. Astoria has been exposed to a few of Harry’s secrets, and Theo’s. Namely, she’s astutely inferred that they mean something to one another. *That’s another one for the vault.* Theo’s oddly proud of her. He’s also proud of Harry who doesn’t break stride or seem frazzled or do anything to draw attention to this moment.

“Yeah, we’re mates, Tor,” Harry says. “When I can shapeshift I’ll ask your lizard if he likes his name.”

“Thanks!” Astoria grins and runs up the steps. “Race you, Harry!”

“I’m gonna beat you!” Harry runs with her in a mock chase that has her laughing merrily. Theo deliberately doesn’t follow. Instead, he watches Harry’s back, just in case he feels some kind of surge of magic like he did last year when crossing the threshold of the castle, but he walks with his spine ramrod straight, as if the pressure of the whispers around him are making him taller. As soon as Theo follows across the threshold, he sees Professor Snape standing by the main staircase, his eyes casually watching the crowd on the pretence of chivvying them into the Great Hall. Theo knows he’s there to make sure Harry arrived. Then his eyes find Theo’s and a long finger beckons him over.

“I’ll see you in there,” Theo mutters to Daphne, stepping out of the flow of the crowd and approaching his head of house.

“Sir?” he says.

“The train was late,” Snape says curtly. “There was a disturbance?”

Theo knows that he must already know the nature of the disturbance but he needs this conversation to appear natural.

“A disagreement on the platform,” Theo says carelessly. because this is how a normal sixth-year student would be treating it. “The Minister for Magic and the Contessa. Politics, I believe.”

“Hmm,” Snape nods. “How is the son?”

For anyone else listening, they will presume he is speaking about either the son of the Contessa or the son of the Minister, both of whom fall under Snape’s purview, but Theo knows the truth. This question is about Harry.

“Well enough,” Theo says in a measured tone. “He announced his engagement.”

Snape's eyebrows shoot up and with a frown, Theo sees him looking at Blaise and Harry's held hands.

"Indeed," he says under his breath. "Interesting timing."

"The Contessa has her reasons, sir."

Theo does not need to say more to Harry's sire, who gives his son and the heir to Magical Europe one last thoughtful scowl before fixing his gaze on Theo properly.

"Chambers has graduated."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

"I need someone to fill his position."

"But, Sir, you are no longer teaching Potions."

"Yet I am still the Potions Master here," Snape's eyes are sharp and dark. "I must brew for the Hospital Wing, I must brew for St Mungo's, I will brew for many other faculties and Professor Slughorn is only here to *teach*, he is not a researcher. I have need of an assistant brewer."

Theo hears the derision in Snape's voice. He knows then that the decision to switch to the position of Defence Professor did not come from Snape and also, Professor Slughorn will not be able to teach Theo in the same way Professor Snape can, the way he needs to be taught in order to advance in his career.

"You're ... you're asking me to be your apprentice?"

"No," Snape's eyes darken and Theo remembers that Snape has never, ever taken anyone under his wing and allowed them to call themselves an apprentice. Chambers was only allowed to call himself 'the assistant.' "I am asking you to learn and to brew and to become so skilled that none can surpass you, do you want to do that?"

Theo remembers what Snape said on the first day of Potions class. *I can teach you how to stopper death.*

"Yes," Theo says, his voice rougher than he wants it to be. *I want to learn. I want to be a healer.*

"Then your Sundays belong to me," Professor Snape says smartly and walks into Great Hall, his black robes billowing behind him. Theo stands for a moment, waiting for a host of second years to pass.

"What did Professor Snape want to talk to you about?"

Theo turns towards the churlish, irritated voice. Draco Malfoy is staring at him, one hand gripping his right forearm.

“I’m to be his assistant this year,” Theo says, looking significantly down at Draco’s forearm. “Eczema, is it?”

Draco glares at him.

“You’re weak,” Draco says quietly. “Moving to the middle with Greengrass.”

“I wouldn’t define Lord Greengrass as weak.”

“I’ve seen real power, Nott, I’ve seen it up close,” Draco steps closer, his eyes gleaming. “You think the Dark Lord will look kindly on you when he comes into his own? Do you think he won’t hesitate to crush Lord Greengrass and the neutral faction for their cowardice? For their disloyalty?”

“Only a fool would underestimate him which is why I can tell you that only a fool would talk about his Master’s plans in the Great Hall,” Theo says quietly, watching Draco’s eyes dart around warily. “Outside of that, the political direction of the House of Nott is none of your business.”

Draco scowls at him and rubs his right arm again. Theo could almost shake his head at Draco’s complete and utter lack of guile. He wonders, sometimes, what happened when Draco put the sorting hat on his head. He was christened a Slytherin almost instantly and aside from Harry somehow managing not to sort at all, Theo considers it the most baffling sorting in Hogwarts history. *Maybe Lucius Malfoy bribed it, if a hat can be bribed.*

“You’ll change your mind,” Draco says, blue eyes that are so much like his mother’s glittering darkly. “They’ll make you change your mind.”

“We’ll see,” Theo says. This only seems to enrage Draco further and steps closer, lips drawn back into a snarl.

“You think you’re special, your alliance with Greengrass and with Zabini, you think it keeps you safe, but it won’t, and you think being Snape’s assistant makes you important? It doesn’t.” Draco says. “Professor Snape always picks a student to be his house elf. You’re basically a slave.”

“Well, we’re all slaves to something,” Theo says pointedly, glancing down at Draco’s arm. “At least Professor Snape hasn’t carved into my fucking skin.”

With that, Theo leaves Draco behind and finds Daphne waiting by the doorway to the Great Hall for him. Her eyes are fixed on Draco, her face drawn into a frown.

“Is he going to be a problem?” She asks quietly as Draco stalks past them both, nose in the air. He swaggers over to sit between Parkinson and Rosier, the bastard son of Evan Rosier, the latter leaning down to whisper in his ear as Draco smirks. Draco says something in response. Rosier has one sleeve pulled up but not the other as if he’s hiding something. Parkinson looks even more smug than usual. Rosier’s dark eyes live to find Theo’s across the hall. Theo remembers meeting Felix Rosier in his childhood.

“Theodore,” Apollonius places a hand on his shoulders. “This is Felix. Your Aunt and his Aunt Tremblay thought it best you meet. They play bridge together.”

“Nice to meet you,” Theo says, thinking that if his Aunt thinks it’s a good idea it’s probably a terrible idea. The older boy says nothing, just looks him up and down slowly.

“Felix is going to Hogwarts the year before you,” Apollonius says. “I am sure you will have lots to speak of.”

When Apollonius leaves the two boys alone, Young Rosier turns his eyes on Theodore, face full of disdain.

“You live with your Aunt?” Theo asks politely, because at least that’s something they have in common. Rosier shakes his head.

“She’s my father’s second cousin,” he says sharply. “I am only staying here with her and my cousin Cornelius because my mother lives in France and my father was murdered by Aurors. He was brave and strong.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Theo says, because that’s what everyone said to him when mother died. Rosier only snorts derisively.

“Your father survived and is weak and defeated. It is better to have a dead father who never failed the Dark Lord than a live one that did,” he sneers. “We will not be friends at school.”

“Good,” Theodore manages to say.

Rosier has clearly done what he always hoped to do, and followed in the footsteps of his long-dead father to become a Death Eater. For the first time probably since the nineteen eighties, there are marked Slytherin children at Hogwarts. Theo knows what this all means. Their clique will build, slowly but surely, and it will be up to Blaise and Daphne and to Theo to hold the neutral ground. Theo knows in his bones that it will not be easy and it will be especially difficult for a child of a dead Death Eater, intent on pushing his historically dark house towards neutrality whilst maintaining an intimate relationship with none other than Harry fucking Potter.

Heart be the bolder, Theo thinks to himself.

“Yes,” he replies to Daphne, watching as Rosier looks away. “They are all going to be a massive problem.”

"Un pour tous, tous pour un." (All for one and one for all) - Alexander Dumas, The Three Musketeers.

Berhenti (Malay) - Cease/stop

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: @elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website: emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Slytherin Again

Chapter Notes

Three chapters this week (because it was too long to be two)

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Harry tangoes with some Slytherins.
Next time, it's time for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry has no idea how he's expected to ever eat again under these fucking conditions. He's sat between Blaise and Theo at the Slytherin table, Daphne and Fitz are opposite him, but it feels like everyone in the room keeps darting their eyes around to him. Even when McGonagall marches in with the new first years, Harry notices how Gryffindor eyes, particularly, slide over to find him. Seamus is looking particularly pissed off, which Harry does not understand at all, but Neville smiles and sends him a small wave and so does Dean, who is sitting, holding hands with Ginny, opposite Ron and Hermione. Ron cranes his neck to look at Harry, as if worried about him, and then nods firmly when Harry gives him a tiny smile in response. Suddenly, he is overwhelmed with a desire to turn back time, to be a third year in a red and gold uniform who blended in with the others, who felt at home and wanted, rather than the boy in the silver uniform with enemies on every side. *Better than being the boy in the graveyard, with Lord Voldemort*, Harry thinks darkly, distracting himself from everyone's sidelong looks by glancing along the teacher's table. He notices the squat man sat beside Severus with a moustache that reminds Harry of a tamarin monkey and leans over to Blaise.

"Who's that?" He mutters.

"Professor Horace Slughorn," Blaise says quietly. "He has not taught for nearly twenty years but is known for his political machinations."

"What does that mean?" Harry frowns.

"He selects who he considers to be premium students and prepares them for power. Finds them jobs when they leave school, connects them with the right people," Blaise shrugs. "He got Cornelius Fudge his job."

“Christ, he must be a twat then,” Harry mutters back. Theo snorts softly beside him.

“He collects students,” Blaise leans his head towards Harry. “The Boy Who Lived would be a covetous prize for a man like him.”

Harry winces. *How can you not be mine?* Tom whispers in the back of his head. He watches Professor Slughorn, the way his eyes dance across the tables of students as if looking for particular faces. When his eyes find Harry’s they sweep quickly away but Harry sees it - there’s a familiar greed there.

“As far as I know, he has only taught Potions,” Blaise muses. “He is a poor replacement for a Defence Professor.”

“Well, he’s not taking the Defence position,” Harry mutters back.

“Is that so?” Blaise’s eyes slide along the top table and rest on Severus. “Ah.”

“Yeah.”

Harry won’t look at Severus. Mainly because, overwhelmingly, he *wants* to look at Severus. He wants to put everything behind his eyes, all his grief over Cedric, and leave it there for his Sire to see but he can’t do that. They are back at school. Severus is Voldemort’s servant and Harry’s enemy and Harry can’t do anything that might let anyone think otherwise.

“Protectors, Harry,” Blaise shakes his head slightly, his eyes still resting on Severus. “You do gather them.”

Harry says nothing but thinks that in the line up of his so-called protectors, Severus would be at the front, wand outstretched, scowl on his familiar face. Instead, Harry stares at the hat as it screams the name of the last student.

“Stop fidgeting,” Blaise hisses, elbowing Harry who is tapping his nails against the wood of the table in a frantic rhythm. “You are practically vibrating with energy.”

“It’s that fucking hat,” Harry grumbles, glaring at it. “If it screams my name I’m gonna strangle it.”

“Can one strangle a hat?”

“Shut up.”

Harry feels Theo’s knee press against his underneath the table and words press gently against his subconscious through the bond: *calm down*. Harry tries to take a deep breath but Professor McGonagall is moving towards the hat and Harry can’t stop himself from holding his breath - *don’t scream at me, don’t you fucking dare* - but then the hat is picked up and taken away and Harry almost slumps in relief.

“Well then,” Blaise whispers. “You are still unsorted, *amore*. Everything will stay as it was, I expect.”

“Yeah,” Harry feels his stomach unclench. “What does that mean? *Amore?*”

“Love,” Theo mutters beside him, carefully not looking at either of them. Harry takes a slow breath in and out and tells himself that all he has to do is get through this fucking day and then he can get into bed with Theo.

“Fine,” Harry almost wishes the food would arrive, just so he could have something to do with his hands, even though he’s never felt less hungry. “That’s fine but I won’t say it back.”

He feels Theo’s thankfulness rushing to him through the bond.

“I would not expect it,” Blaise grins. “Your Italian is barely serviceable, *amore.*”

“Hey! I can order a coffee and play football and yell for help and that’s all the matters,” Harry protests, watching as Dumbledore stands up, his arms outstretched. A couple of people gasp at his hand which Harry sees, is still looking very dead.

“Nothing to worry about,” Dumbledore says, pushing on with an introduction to Professor Slughorn.

“That is not a normal wound,” Blaise whispers.

“You’re telling me.” The Peverell ring sings softly to him on his finger. Blaise raises his eyebrows.

“Do you know something?”

“No.”

“You are a fucking awful liar,” Blaise mutters, a pleasant smile still fixed on his face. Before Harry can answer, Dumbledore is announcing that Severus is the new Defence teacher and the Slytherins are clapping. Harry doesn’t clap. He sits, mulishly glaring, trying to look very annoyed which isn’t hard, because he’s pretty sure MacLaggen is gossiping about him at the Gryffindor table right now.

“Meanwhile, those who would like to be considered for Quidditch tryouts should speak to their Heads of Houses or Quidditch captains ...”

Harry’s eyes find Katie Bell, who is wearing the Quidditch captain badge and feels a twinge of sadness. Then he notices that further down the table, Draco is staring at him smugly, fingering the Quidditch captain badge on his chest. Harry shoots him a glare of hatred. He might be unsorted, but he will never *ever* support the Slytherin Quidditch team.

“Fuck him,” Harry hisses to himself under his breath. *“I’m going to learn to fucking shapeshift, I’ll be able to really fucking fly one day -,”*

“Stop hissing please,” Blaise says quietly, smiling softly. Harry scowls. He wishes Sahara was here but she’s already slid off to the Greenhouses. Dumbledore waves his hand and the food appears. Harry stares down at his plate. There’s a paper aeroplane on it.

“Fuck,” Harry swallows hard.

“What?” Blaise asks. Theo is unnaturally still next to him.

Harry tries to keep breathing.

“Do you, um, do you know any spells to detect, like, compulsions?” Harry asks, trying to stop his voice from shaking. Across the table, Daphne has stopped spooning potatoes onto her plate. She takes out her wand and waves it.

“*Coactio revelio*,” Daphne whispers. Nothing happens.

“That was exciting,” Blaise says drily. “Will you open it?”

“I know who it’s from,” Harry swallows back nausea. He unfolds it with trembling hands.

I like to keep such things close.

Congratulations.

“Well,” Harry tries not to let his voice shake. *It’s official. Tom knows.* “Welcome to the shitshow, Blaise.”

“That is not a letter. That is eight words long and entirely insincere.” Blaise asks, frowning at the words over Harry’s shoulder. “Who is the sender?”

“Lord ... Gaunt,” Harry mutters, glancing around the table but no one is looking at them. Before Harry can say another word, the note vanishes from his hand with a tug of the invisible tether around his wrist. He knows where to look so he very deliberately, does not look.

“I guess Lord Gaunt doesn’t want his messages kept,” Blaise says.

“So it would seem,” Daphne mutters, putting potatoes on Harry’s plate. Harry steals a glance up towards Severus, sees him staring at something next to his plate. Harry knows it’s the note. He sees a small flare of smoke and knows Severus has burnt it. Somehow, that’s comforting. Harry remembers Severus’ words the last time Tom wrote to him: *He does not have you.*

“He writes to you often?” Blaise asks.

“Only on my birthday,” Harry picks up his fork and prods the potatoes. “And when I announce on platform 9 and 3/4 that I’m ... y’know, promised.”

“Announce to the Minister of Magic, more like,” Daphne says quietly.

“Yes, that.”

“Well, I am flattered to be of notice,” Blaise says drily. “Though I do think his correspondence lacks decorum.”

Harry laughs and is very grateful, suddenly for Blaise’s total lack of fucks when it comes to Tom Riddle.

“Something funny, Potter-Black?” Harry stares at the dark haired seventh year who has slid onto the bench beside Daphne, shoving Fitz down towards his friends. Harry doesn’t know all the Slytherins but he recognises this particular face as one of the group who had hung around Tremblay last year.

“Heir Rosier,” Blaise says easily. Harry groans internally because he can remember the dumb tapestry that hung in Grimmauld place with the Rosier line still happily intact. *Fucking pureblood Death Eater relatives!* “Good travels?”

“Fine, Zabini,” Rosier’s tone is polite and dismissive as he fixes his eyes on Harry. “Cousin?”

Harry winces but steels himself for some Slytherin bullshit.

“Just laughing about how crazy it is that a bunch of people follow a six foot snake man around,” Harry says, as breezily as he can manage. “But you’d know all about that, I bet?”

He doesn’t know for sure that Rosier’s a Death Eater, but Harry’s got pretty good at guessing and with the House of Black, Sirius was definitely the exception rather than the rule.

“*Trés amusant,*” Rosier muses and Harry remembers from the tapestry that Rosier’s mother had a long, French name. “People follow power. The Dark Lord does offer something unique in that regard.”

Harry takes that to be as much as a confirmation of Rosier’s Death Eater status as seeing a Dark Mark on him and merely snorts derisively at his words. Rosier’s eyes slide to Theo.

“You’d know all about following power, wouldn’t you, Nott?”

Harry tries not to stiffen. *I have found my power. I intend to follow it.* That’s what Theo wrote on his letter to Apollonius when he pretended to be the Heir of Slytherin. Theo is staring at Rosier in a way that makes Harry wonder if they know each other.

“Yes,” Theo says quietly. “*Corvus oculum corgi non eruit,* Rosier.”

“The crow shall not pull out the eye of the other crow,” Blaise translates. “The motto of the House of Rosier.”

Harry understands the implication.

“Or a raven.” He gives Rosier a significant glare and feels the caw of the Black magic in his veins. “That’s a pretty shitty motto, *cousin*.”

Rosier gives him a slow smile.

“Dans une famille, on est attachés les uns aux autres par des fils invisibles qui nous ligotent, même quand on les coupe,” he says quietly.

“In family, we are attached by ties that bind us, even when we cut them,” Blaise translates again.

“That’s nice,” Harry says blandly. It’s probably a threat of some kind, but he’s tired, annoyed, and all he wants is to just be in a bed with Theo in it.

“It is, isn’t it?” Rosier looks at them all slowly and then stands up, eyes flitting over Harry’s finger. “I have to say, I am surprised you came back, cousin. Rumour had it that you were, how shall I say, too *unfit* to return to school.”

Harry knows he’s talking about Bellatrix

“That’s me,” Harry says levelly. “I just keep surviving.”

“Oh yes,” Rosier smirks. “My cousin Tremblay sends his regards.”

“Wanker,” Fitz coughs behind his roll, glaring at Rosier for mentioning his half brother but when Rosier turns his gaze on Fitz, the younger boy instantly recoils and turns back to his friends.

“I bet he does,” Harry says sarcastically. Rosier smiles at them all.

“Good to see you, Nott,” he says quietly before walking away.

“Friend of yours?” Harry mutters to Theo.

“Childhood acquaintance,” Theo murmurs back under the cover of drinking some pumpkin juice.

Could be worse, Harry tells himself, as he accepts a bread roll from Daphne and begins to pick at it. *Could be Piers Fucking Polkiss*. Theo snorts slightly into his cup of pumpkin juice and Harry realises he must have heard Harry's thought through the bond. Their knees are touching under the table.

"Not much worse, actually," Theo mutters into his cup. That tells Harry as much about Heir Rosier as he needs to know.

"Brilliant," Harry mutters sarcastically.

“Why are you still here?” Malfoy snarls, glaring at Harry where he stands in the doorway to the sixth year Slytherin dormitory. At the end of the feast, Severus had swept down the hall and growled at him in a threatening tone: “Everything will continue as it did before.” Harry was too grateful to comment but he did notice Dumbledore’s frown at the top table. He scampered out of the hall with Blaise and Theo before anyone could question it. He had a little bit of fun chatting with the Slytherin snakes in the common room and catching Fitz up with all their news (mainly that they had some babies and ate some spiders). It seems like his threats in the Slytherin common room last year have lasted until this year and no one bothered them, until now. Now it's Draco fucking Malfoy, standing between Harry and his new bed.

“Because I’m unsorted and I get to choose where I live,” Harry shrugs.

“And you’re choosing *here*?” Malfoy says with an incredulous sneer.

“Why is that strange, Draco?” Blaise says easily, pulling off his robes. Theo is sitting on his trunk at the end of his bed, flicking his knife in and out of its socket in a vaguely threatening way. “He lived here last year, after all.”

“Oh, I see, wanting to keep your latest conquest close, Zabini?” Malfoy’s face turns into a jeering smirk and he looks between Harry and Blaise. “I didn’t realise you were such an easy fuck, Potter-Black.”

Theo hesitates, perhaps for a millisecond as he flicks his knife. Blaise pauses in unbuttoning his shirt. Crabbe and Goyle are both watching carefully. Harry knows that all of them are waiting to see what he does, especially after the Wizengamot. Harry smiles at Malfoy.

“Do you think about me fucking a lot, Malfoy?” He asks lightly.

“He does seem a little preoccupied,” Blaise adds.

“Obsessed, more like,” Goyle mutters.

“Shut up,” Malfoy glares at Goyle before turning back to Harry. “You don’t have a very good sense of self preservation, do you, Potter-Black?”

“And why is that?”

“Because even if Zabini is your boyfriend, you’ve decided to room with *three* death Eaters.”

Malfoy pulls up his sleeve. Crabbe eagerly follows. Even Goyle hesitantly pulls his back. Harry stares at their arms. It’s amazing to him that Tom’s work never changes. Severus’ is just as dark as these fresh ones.

“Wow. Those are some really shit tattoos,” Harry drawls, flexing his own tattoo and then folding his arms as he glares at Malfoy. “Seems like being under my Sanctuary has done fucking nothing for your ability to make a good decision.”

“You’re using the Sanctuary to control me!” Malfoy growls, stepping forward. Harry forces himself not to grimace, because the taste of the compulsion is so sickly on the air. Behind

Draco, (and suddenly, with the compulsion so thick around him, Harry can't *stop* himself from thinking of him as Draco) Blaise picks up his wand and Theo stands up. Harry simply rolls his eyes.

"If I'm trying to control you it's because you're my fucking cousin and a literal idiot," Harry snaps. Draco snarls and raises his wand only to gasp and lower it. Harry knows his hand and the warning mark there must be burning.

"See?" Harry shakes his head. "Idiot."

"I might not be able to touch you, Potter, but that doesn't mean others can't," Draco (no, not Draco, Malfoy. *Malfoy!*) whispers, his eyes glittering with excitement.

"Does it seem like I would let you do that?" Blaise's voice is very light. "Hurt my intended?"

"You're engaged?" Malfoy rounds on Blaise with a furious expression his face.

"Promised." Blaise wiggles his finger and the Black ring flashes brightly.

"You're marrying *him*? Of all fucking people?" Malfoy looks like he is slowly becoming apoplectic as he rounds on Harry, voice raising to a shout. "You are utterly undeserving of the title of Lord Black! It should be mine!"

"Really? Auntie Bellatrix tell you that?" Harry can tell by the surprised look in Malfoy's face that he's landed on the truth. "Because its exactly the kind of thing she said and now she's lost a finger."

"Shut up!" Malfoy spins to look at Crabbe. "Hurt him!"

"Oh really? Talked that through with your *Lord*, have you? Had a nice little chat and made sure he's not feeling too possessive of me?" Harry glares at Crabbe who stops. "Because you know he nearly killed this one's Dad when he tried to kill me in a graveyard last year."

"You shut up about my father." Malfoy is breathing heavily as he steps so close Harry can taste the lingering waves of the compulsion coming off him. It tastes so ashy and cloying in his mouth. Harry swallows hard and tries not to let it distract him.

"Why should I?" Harry snaps. "Too afraid to hear the truth? That he fucks your Auntie as well as Voldemort? Though, to be fair, all purebloods seem to fuck their relatives -,"

"*You* are a pureblood," Theo mutters, as if he wants to remind him to keep his cover. *Can't go revealing I'm actually the child of a muggleborn and a half-blood.*

"I guess I'm the exception that proves the rule," Harry looks back into Malfoy's face, his blue eyes have never left Harry's. "Want to be like your Dad, Malfoy? Well, Tremblay's our cousin through our dear Aunt Bellatrix. Maybe you should go and suck *him* off."

"Shut your bloody mouth," Malfoy growls and Harry realises then that Malfoy is possibly the most obvious person in the universe, as a deep flush rushes across his face.

“Oh my God, Jesus Christ,” Harry grins slowly and laughs. “You *are* sucking him, aren’t you? Well, I suppose if your Dad’s going to suck a monster like Riddle -”

“Curse him, Goyle!” Malfoy shouts. Goyle’s eyes widen and he lifts his wand, hand trembling. Theo is reaching for his wand, as is Blaise, and Harry knows that Goyle can’t curse him because of their no wands treaty. He notices the way Goyle is clenching his other hand into a fist and Harry remembers the terms of their treaty: *If you need to, just punch me in the face.*

“Go for it,” Harry sneers, giving Goyle the smallest of nods. He sees a grateful flash in the other boy’s eye before a fist collides with his nose.

“Harry!” Blaise yells. It’s an explosion of pain and Harry immediately buckles over, knowing from experience that at least one bone is broken.

“I said curse him, not brawl him!” Malfoy shouts above him. “For fuck’s sake, Goyle!”

Suddenly Blaise is pulling Harry upright, looking into his face with worry.

“Get back or I’ll cut out your fucking tongue.” Theo is standing between them and the junior Death Eaters.

“Oh yes, *of course*, you’re Zabini’s pet *guard dog* aren’t you now, Nott?” Malfoy jeers. “How the mighty have fucking fallen!”

“Are you alright?” Blaise asks, pushing a handkerchief against Harry’s face and he gratefully presses it against the throbbing skin, leaning his head back.

“I’m fine,” Harry coughs. He backs out of the door, his eyes sliding to Theo who is staring at him with a deliberately neutral expression. “I’m just going to get this seen to.”

Harry closes the door behind him and walks a few steps down the stairs before he pulls out his journal. With eyes stinging and vision blurry he manages to scrawl out a sentence for Theo. *I’m going to Severus, don’t wait up for me.* He stumbles down into the common room.

“Potter-Black?” Harry notices someone sitting in a wingback chair by the bookcase. They lean forward. It’s the new Head Boy, Harry doesn’t know his name but he’s wearing the badge. He knows that the new Head Girl is Belinda Wildsmith in Ravenclaw. “What’s wrong with your face?”

“I’m going to the hospital wing,” Harry mumbles underneath Blaise’s white handkerchief. There’s blood trickling down his wrist. The Head Boy stands up slowly and walks across to look at him.

“You don’t know me, do you?” He asks quietly.

“No, sorry,” Harry mutters.

“My name is Archibald Farley,” he says. “You know my sister.”

“Ah,” Harry stares at Gemma Farley’s younger brother. Gemma is the heir to the House of Farley and has signed a bear wands treaty with Harry but he has no idea if this Farley knows anything about it. The new head boy gives him a long, considering look.

“Head Girl Wildsmith and I are running an anti-bullying campaign this year,” he says, glancing at Harry’s face. “I shall ensure no student in this school is a victim of prejudicial violence. If they are hurting you because you used to be a Gryffindor, tell me.”

“Thanks so much,” Harry tries not to sound sarcastic but it’s very hard. After all, anti-bullying campaigns don’t stop Death Eaters. Or Voldemort. Farley raises an eyebrow but then looks back down at his book.

“Go to the hospital wing, Potter-Black,” he says. Harry is more than happy to oblige but, as he walks dizzily and thinks about sharing a bathroom with three Death Eaters (*are they going to have to moisturise their marks every day?*) he finds himself at the door of Severus' office. He knocks and the door swings open. Severus is clearly in the midst of brewing as his robes have been removed and his shirt sleeves rolled up. He gives Harry one glance, looks up and down the corridor and then says, as curtly as anyone would expect a Head of House addressing a student he profoundly dislikes:

“Get in then and explain yourself thoroughly,” Severus holds open the door and speaks in a threatening tone. “Believe me when I say that if the explanation is unsatisfactory, you will regret it.”

Harry ducks inside. He stares at Severus who has raised his dark eyebrows expectantly as he allows the door to close. There is silence. Harry is profoundly glad to see his Sire but he doesn’t know how to say it. *I kinda sort of missed you.*

“My nose hurts,” Harry blurts out.

“I inferred,” Severus waves open the door in the wall that connects his office to his quarters and Harry follows. Harry drops onto the leather sofa with a grateful sigh. “What occurred?”

“Goyle punched me.”

“Gregory Goyle punched you?” Severus stares in surprise from the kitchen where he is pulling vials down from the cupboards. “Why?”

“Because Draco told him to curse me.”

Severus sighs as if he expected that and crosses back over to the coffee table. He sits down on its edge, places the bottles beside him and gently pulls Harry’s hand away from his face.

“Tilt your head back,” he says. Harry obeys and feels Severus gingerly pull his Potter glasses off his face. Harry winces and then feels the tip of Severus’ wand pressed against his mashed nose. “*Episkey.*”

There is a slight cracking sound and suddenly Harry can suddenly breathe better. Severus dips a cloth in balm that Harry recognises as one used to reduce swelling. He sits still as

Severus presses the cloth over his cheeks, breathing in the scent of eucalyptus.

“Why has Mr Goyle not only broken your nasal bridge but also fractured your maxilla?”

Severus touches his wand to Harry’s puffy cheek and Harry winces at the tingle.

“He’s a Death Eater but he has a no wands treaty with me. I told him ages ago that if he had to, he should just punch me,” Harry winces as Severus reapplies the damp cloth. “Thanks for the heads up that’s he’s a Death Eater, by the way.”

“Speaking of giving a person an advanced warning...” Severus’ eyes are fixed on his nose and cheeks but his brow is furrowed intensely. “Mr Zabini?”

“You heard what happened at the station?” Harry grimaces.

Severus pulls the cloth away and twists the top off a blue glass tub. He begins to rub it over the wound. It tingles.

“Bane sent me a message,” Harry watches as Severus cleans his hand on the now- rusty coloured rag. “This alliance for Lupin’s sake, then?”

Harry nods. Severus slowly clears up the collection of medicines and carries them back over to the black kitchen countertop.

“He is safe,” Severus says. “He will be safe now.”

Harry didn’t know how much he needed to hear the words from Severus’ lips until they’re spoken aloud. *Thank fuck for that.*

“Will I be able to see him?” Harry is suddenly urgent to, as if the need to assure himself of Remus’ wellbeing can only be done through physical touch. “Because we’re in Scotland?”

“It is unwise. Hogwarts is sacred wixen land, its jurisdiction is shared by all of the governances of the United Kingdom. Thus, the Scottish Rood has longstanding treaties with England and the Ministry of Magic,” Severus puts the medicines back in their appropriate drawers in the kitchen. “They have a foot in Magical Europe and foot in Magical England but are neither.”

“So it’s kind of neutral ground,” Harry mutters.

“It is dangerous ground,” Severus says slowly. “There is nothing to stop Lupin coming here but equally, if someone attacks him here or, as it is likely, tried to abduct him from Scotland to remove him to England for trial, the Rood could not intervene.”

“So I can’t see him here,” Harry says.

“He can only come here, to my quarters, secretly, but it must be done sparingly,” Severus sighs. “We would be wise not to invite him unless it is essential. He is a fugitive from the English Wixen government.”

Fugitive. It's the first time the word has been said. Harry closes his eyes against the inevitable, crushing guilt. *This is my fault.*

"It is not your fault," Severus says sharply, uncannily reading Harry's mood. *He's becoming scarily good at that.*

"Could we meet him at Skye?" Harry asks, desperately.

"Skye is a last resort now," Severus closes a drawer and looks up. "As Albus said, it is a bolthole. It is the most severely warded of all our collective properties. We should use it sparingly."

Because Remus is a fugitive and you are a Death Eater and I'm Harry fucking Potter. Harry hates this feeling, like the world pulling them all apart, agonisingly slowly.

"So we can't go home?" Harry can't stop the plaintive tone from coming out. Severus seems to almost drop something and then recover.

"No," Severus says. "We cannot all go home together. At least, not until the situation is rectified."

Harry nods and leans back. He knows what that means. *Until Malfoy is no longer Minister of Magic. Until Tom is dead.* Harry thinks of his bedroom at Spinner's End, of the blanket handmade blanket that he and Theo left behind. He thinks of how the cellar stairs creak at the end of the day when Severus climbs them after brewing. He realises, abruptly, that for the first time in his life he will miss a home that in some way belonged to him and is not Hogwarts. *Well. That's new.*

"Were you going to tell me there were Death Eaters in the castle?" He asks.

"Yes."

"Will you tell me how many there are?"

"Five."

"Will you tell me who they are?"

"You tell me," Severus comes and sits in his leather wingback chair, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

"Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Rosier ..." Harry scowls to think of that wanker. "Who's the fifth?"

"Miss Parkinson."

"Really?" Harry stares at Severus. He would never have pegged Parkinson as the kind to take a mark. "She's not the type to want to get her hands dirty, at least I didn't think she was."

"She is not," Severus says evenly. "But the Dark Lord has recently been made aware of the value of heirs."

“This is because of the Wizengamot, right? Because of what I did?” Harry sighs. Severus inclines his head.

“You need to be careful. He has seen your Wizengamot performance.”

“I knew he would.”

“He has ... drawn conclusions.”

“I bet he has,” Harry drawls sarcastically.

“Harrison,” Severus folds his hands in front of him and leans forward. “I need you to underperform in my classes.”

“I ... what?” Harry stares at Severus, thinking of his one hundred percent in Defense in his OWLS and Severus’ promise that he would make sure he learned something this year.

“The Dark Lord wants me to test the bounds of your magic,” Severus says evenly. “He wants to see the raven magic drawn out of you -,”

“The what now?”

“That’s what it is called in the House of Black,” Severus gestures over Harry’s shoulders as if he has wings. “The magic that formed your wings. The raven magic.”

“Okay. But ... how would you do that?” Harry asks, trying to adjust his thinking. “I mean, he thinks I hate you so how would you test my magic?”

“Unfortunately, we do not need to have any kind of meaningful connection to do so,” Severus says. “The Dark Lord believes your heir and lordship magic can be drawn out by ... discomfort.”

“I *bet* he does,” Harry sighs and rubs the sensitive bridge of his nose. He wonders at what point Severus started classifying whatever they’re currently doing as a ‘meaningful connection.’ Harry doesn’t hate it, he knows Severus is not wrong, but he also doesn’t want to think about it too much either. *Three family bonds*, Magnus’ voice whispers in his mind. “So what’s the plan?”

That’s all it is, really, another plan to fool Tom. Harry is trying very hard not to be very sick of plans.

“I will pair you consistently with students in your class who will wish to see you humbled. I will enable them to cast spells designed to hurt you.”

“Okay,” Harry takes a long breath. He was an idiot for actually looking forward to Severus teaching defense. “I can ... I can handle pain.”

“No, you will not,” Severus’ eyes flash. “You will defend yourself.”

“But I thought you wanted me to -?”

“You will learn to defend yourself in a way that does not utilise your heir magic *at all*,” Severus says sharply. “You will prioritise your wand spells and use them even when you are most challenged and I will be forced to challenge you. Then, when the Dark Lord asks for my report and sees my memories, he will see a young man who can fight but not a boy who is teeming with the kind of unchecked magic that he covets.”

“Won’t he punish you? If you don’t bring him what he wants?”

“Undoubtedly,” Severus says carelessly. “But the Dark Lord does not need a reason to hand out punishments, Harrison.”

Harry understands. Severus is going to be tortured either way. They might as well get what they want out of it.

“So ... so we need it to look like I ... I don’t know how to use my heir magic?” Harry says nervously, trying not to think about how hard this is going to be.

“No, Harrison, after all, all normal heirs learn some heir magic, what we need is for it to look like the magic is not instinctual to you,” Severus says insistently. “That you do not have the natural aptitude you possess. Raw power, wild power, that is what the Dark Lord craves. We will present a situation where you look as if you have been well-trained and hide the truth.”

“That no ones trained me and I’m a fucking walking magic-hurricane,” Harry mumbles.

“Language,” Severus says. “And yes. You are a Mage. That must be hidden.”

“Right, right, *negahbane raaz*,” Harry mutters. “When’s our first Defence class?”

“Tomorrow.”

“*Fuck*.” Harry hisses.

“Language,” Severus says wryly.

“Well,” Harry sighs and stands up. “I guess you’d better teach me then.”

Severus nods and stands, carefully waving his wand in a slow motion. The furniture is suddenly pushed back against the wall of bookcases and the dusty floor is revealed. Severus gestures for Harry to stand at the other end of the room in front of the stacked sofa and chairs.

“We will start with wordless casting.”

Harry lifts his wand.

“*Come*,” he hisses in parseltongue inside his mind and the small blue tub flies into Harry’s hand.

“Summoning charm?” Severus asks. Harry nods, throwing it back to Severus. He catches it well, which Harry finds surprising, since Severus has never missed an opportunity to mock

Harry's quick Seeker reflexes.

"Good. Tomorrow we will be practicing wordless jinxes and wordless repulsions. I will challenge you either by giving your partner an advantage or casting at you myself. You will need to defend yourself *without* the Black magic or the Slytherin magic or the Prince magic. You know the shield charm?"

Harry raises his wand again.

"*Protect*," he hisses inside his mind. A shield emerges from the end of his wand. To Harry, it looks sort of strange. He realises that he hasn't cast a shield from his wand since he got his Slytherin and Black heir rings.

"Good," Severus says. "Now, I will jinx you and you will shield."

"Okay." Harry tries not to sound nervous but Severus is still Severus. He might save Harry's life on a regular basis but he's still fucking terrifying when he's pointing a wand. Severus seems to notice because he lowers his wand slightly.

"The jelly legs jinx," he says. Harry nods, taking a deep breath in through his nose.

"Go," he says.

Severus casts. Harry deflects. Severus nods.

"Again then."

They repeat and Harry is faster. Severus nods again.

"Now again."

This time, as soon as Harry deflects, Severus is moving his wand again and Harry knows he's going to cast another, maybe something different. Harry throws up his left hand without thinking: *Protect*.

A silver, Black shield emerges, spasming and wide between them.

"No," Severus says forcefully, lowering his wand.

"I don't mean to -," Harry starts to protest.

"Then stop," Severus says urgently. "Stop. Control yourself."

It's a little too close to the angrily shouted: *Close your mind!* in their first occlumency lessons and Harry is suddenly very annoyed.

"Okay, sure, I'll just stop fucking breathing then shall I, too?" Harry yells sarcastically, dropping his shield. "Shall I stop thinking and pumping my fucking heart whilst I'm at it?"

“Language,” Severus shakes his head and twirls his wand through his fingers. “Does your heir magic feel that innate to you?”

“As innate as what?”

“As breathing. As thinking,” Severus’ voice is soft, his eyes fixed on Harry. There’s a particular way that Severus still sometimes looks at him that has unchanged in all the years Harry has known him; like he is a puzzle to be undone. Harry prickles with the discomfort of it.

“I only need a thought,” Harry says shortly. “That’s what Magnus says.”

“But not every thought has magic in it, Harrison,” Severus says. “It is possible to add direction, to dictate it’s flow -,”

“It’s possible for you!” Harry bursts out. “I - look!”

Harry drops his wand and thinks about everything that makes him so fucking angry right now. *Malfoy. Tom. Bellatrix. Sirius. All the gossip in this sodding place.* When he can feel it tingling through him, he shows Severus his hand, the gold sparks flickering out of them.

“You are overwhelmed,” Severus’ eyes are watching Harry’s fingers carefully. “Calm down.”

Harry knows that Severus and Remus are now trained to see the sparks and worry that Harry is going to self-harm but Harry needs him to understand. He suddenly wishes that Luna was here, that he could show the way his bones glow gold under her touch.

“No, I’m not overwhelmed, I’m explaining,” Harry snaps. “This isn’t heir magic, it’s *me*. Every thought can have magic in it, that’s my fucking problem.”

“If that is the case, what thought was behind you casting the cruciatus curse on Bellatrix Lestrange?” Severus’ eyes glitter darkly.

“I didn’t.” Harry frowns. “Did I?”

“She thinks you did.” Severus’ voice is entirely without judgement but Harry can tell from the way he is standing that Harry will be in a shit load of trouble if he lies. He thinks hard.

“I ... wanted to hurt her,” Harry tries to think of Prongs advancing, of being almost torn apart by Dido’s Lament. It hurts to remember, but he tries. “That spell, the one that killed Arthur, it feels fucking terrible -,”

“Language - ,”

“Really, really, really, really bad then,” Harry says scornfully. “I was thinking that I hated her, that I wanted her to scream like I was screaming ...”

“You cast it when you were in pain. You made it real without intent,” Severus’ voice is soft. Severus places his own wand on the table. He holds his hands out. “What do you see?”

Harry looks at Severus' fingers, so long like his own, and sees only the gathering of shadows of the Prince ring.

"Shadows," Harry says quietly. Severus' eyebrows rise up.

"You see shadows?"

"Yeah, they're the Prince shadows, I see them ..." Harry gently tugs on his tether and Severus' face softens for the barest moment before he stretches out his fingers in demonstration.

"My power is not shown visibly in my skin as yours is and cannot be called forth without a conduit," Severus picks up his wand. "When I hold the wand, it brings forth what is already leaping inside me, unable to break the skin."

"I'm ... I don't feel like that," Harry looks down at the gold sparks on his fingertips. He holds the wand limply in his hand. Harry swallows hard and looks up at Severus, letting the worry flood into his eyes. He's not seen his Sire since he put him in the floo at Spinner's End and so much has happened. Harry realises he's really missed their daily check ins. "Marina said I could probably use any wand now but she says there isn't going to be a wand that suits me anymore, so this wand ... it doesn't feel right anymore, not like using heir magic does."

"Harrison, you do not need the wand, just like Bane doesn't need a wand. You are a Mage," Severus' words are very measured and Harry finds it annoying.

"I can't just be like Magnus can I? I have NEWTS and classes and now fucking *Voldemort* who I'm trying to fool with all this stuff," Harry exclaims. "I *have* to use a wand! Everyone will see if I don't!"

"Then show them what they wish to see."

Severus opens a drawer in the kitchen and pulls something out.

"What?" Harry stares as Severus crosses the room and takes his wand from him. He replaces it with a stirring rod. "I definitely can't do magic with this."

"That is the point," Severus says calmly. "For you do not need to do magic *with* it, you only need to do magic *through* it. You do not need a conduit so do not think of it as a conduit you need to be compatible with. Simply think of it as an object in your hand. Think the words to spells in parseltongue and use the rod. Here." Severus places a second one in Harry's other hand. "So you cannot be tempted to use your rings. Do not ask the rod to do anything, use what is inside yourself, not in your rings."

"So it's ... it's like a prop?"

"It is exactly like a prop," Severus nods. "You have no need of a conduit so do not try to use a conduit."

"Through, not with," Harry repeats.

“Precisely,” Severus nods. “Are you ready?”

Harry looks at the rods in his hands. It’s bizarre and odd but strangely, Harry is grateful because it’s something to do, at least.

“Yes.”

Harry practises with the stirring rods until they are cracked and burned. Then Severus replaces them, setting a pile next to Harry on the desk.

“Now we go again,” Severus pulls his hair back in a ribbon. It always looks strange to Harry, as if its the back of Severus’ neck is something Harry shouldn’t be seeing. “I will teach you incantations for other shields and you will interpret parseltongue phrases that replicate them, so you can cast them wordlessly.”

“Okay.” Harry squares his shoulders. He doesn’t care that its late. He doesn’t care that he’s exhausted. Today he’s dealt with the Minister of Magic, losing his new Tad, faking an engagements, memories of Cedric, Rosier, Draco fucking Malfoy, Goyle punching him and every gossipy idiot under the sun. He wants to do something active. He wants learn to fight. “Let’s do it.”

Harry learns *Protego Maxima* which he interprets as *Protect Unbound* in parseltongue and *Protego Totalum*, (*Protect nest*) and *Protego totalum*. (*Protect All*).

“That one’s really cool,” Harry grins, brushing his hair out of his eyes. Maybe he should tie his back like Severus does. “What’s next?”

“The *Protego Diabolica* is considered a darker spell,” Severus says quietly.

“Did you ask the magic if its dark or just assume?” Harry says, twirling the stirring rod in the fingers of his right hand. It’s much lighter than his wand, easier to turn and move.

“Please try to control your facetiousness,” Severus says, rolling his eyes. “Notice how I used the word ‘considered,’ not ‘determined’ to be.”

Harry smirks.

“Well, cast it and I’ll *determine* for you if it’s dark,” Harry grins.

“Such generosity,” Severus drawls. He sees Severus is trying not to smirk and that only makes him grin wider. Harry realises he’s having fun. It’s an odd thought. This time last year, this would have been his worst nightmare.

“Show me,” Harry nods eagerly. Severus raises his wand and hesitates. For a second, it looks like he has real reservations. Harry’s not sure why. He knows that Severus would never teach him something that might be bad for him.

“*Protego Diabolica*,” Severus murmurs. Black fire erupts in a circle all around him, but the cold stone floor of the dungeon is unmarked. The flames rise but don’t escalate. There’s a

strange feeling coming from them that Harry can't quite organise in his head. Harry tilts his head to the side, closes his eyes and listens to the flame.

"What do you hear?" Severus asks.

"It's like ... umm, not sure," Harry thinks. Underneath the normal sound that flame makes, there's an ominous type of furious clicking. Harry opens his eyes.

"Can I touch the flame?" He asks.

"If you were an enemy, no, it would incinerate you for that is its purpose," Severus says quietly. "You can touch it. Carefully."

Harry does, watches the black flame lick his hand and closes his eyes, listening to the song of it. There's no melody, but the clicking has a tempo, a rhythm that reminds him of morse code. Severus watches him and then, slowly, pushes more power into the spell. The clicking intensifies and with it, Harry begins to hear a drumming song. He smiles.

"Nope," Harry steps back. "It doesn't sound evil, just ... powerful."

"What would evil sound like?"

A high pitched screech. Lime green light. Never-ending, mocking laughter.

"Can I try it?" Harry says, ignoring the question.

Severus hesitates.

"Do you remember how the compulsion felt?" He asks quietly.

"Yeah," Harry swallows hard. He fucking hates the taste of Draco's compulsion. Severus said it would fade and its true that Harry doesn't feel it all the time, but he feels it around Draco and its the worst.

"If no magic is truly evil, then it is perhaps most akin to muggle drugs," Severus says softly. "Opium is an amoral substance, it has no evil intent, but the addiction it causes in those who become slaves to it ..."

"So it's possible to become ... addicted to some magic?" Harry thinks about it, about how glorious the compulsion had tasted at first, how right and powerful on his tongue. "I guess that makes sense. How do you not get addicted?"

"By understanding that these spells are tools to protect yourself or others, they are not for pleasure or power," Severus' eyes are glittering behind the dark fire. "The Dark Lord teaches the opposite. He guides those who follow him to use this type of spell *because* it gives them pleasure and power. It is much easier to control a person who is driven by an addiction to power."

"Okay," Harry nods slowly. "So I should ... focus on protecting myself?"

“Precisely. On the goal rather than the emotions it induces. If necessary, use occlumency.” Severus says sharply. “When troublesome feelings arise, drown them.”

“Got it.”

Severus waves his wand and the fire is gone. Harry tries and fails a couple of times, working out that the words he needs in parseltongue are not *Protect and Attack* but *Protect and Burn*. Then black fire streams out of the stirring rod, instantly catching it on fire as the flames rise up around him. Harry drops the stirring rod.

“Stop the fire, Harrison,” Severus says quietly. “Remember, you do not need the conduit, just like Bane. Do not let it consume you.”

Harry nods. There is a thrum of power in his ears, like a the low drone of a bass instrument pounding away, trying to intice him, but Harry ignores it. He stretches out his bare fingers, trying to ignore the pull of his rings and their desire to contribute. *Another time*, he tells them. *Let me do this*. They quieten down.

“*Cease*,” he hisses and the flames stop. Harry’s relieved. The low, enticing drone of the spell’s song is still there but staring to disappear, quietly.

“Good,” Severus nods. “You ended the spell with your own magic, not with your heir rings. Are you well?”

“Burnt fingers,” Harry whispers. Severus wordlessly picks up a burn ointment and crosses over to him, slathering the orange paste on Harry’s fingers until it is properly absorbed. Harry stares at his feet. There is a small pile of cracked and smoking stirring rods littered around him like so many used matches. Harry is breathing heavily but he doesn’t want to stop. Not yet. “Are we going again?”

“Yes,” Severus steps back, he walks and puts the ointment back on the counter, carefully picking up Harry’s wand and handing it slowly back to him. “Remember, this is no different. Do not try to cast with it, cast *through* it, as you have been doing. Use whatever we have learned tonight, except the *Protego Diabolica*. Are we understood?”

Harry looks down at the wand in his hand, tries to feel some of the sparks it once contained, some hint of that joy. *I’m sorry*, Harry finds himself thinking to it. *I wish we still fit but we don’t. So until I can find the Elder wand, I’m just going to work through you*. Harry hopes that the slight warmth he feels under his fingers is assent and not imagination.

“Yes,” he says firmly.

“Then again.”

Harry feels like he might be getting better, that the wordless magic dancing between them might be flowing easier and quicker than before and he’s *listening* too, learning the sound of the different curses like Magnus and Bill taught him to, but his breath is coming hard and fast and Severus hasn’t even broken a sweat. *He’s really fucking good at this*. Harry’s hands ache and he’s sweaty but he’s oddly exhilarated. He hasn’t been taught like this since he and

Cedric were training for the tournament. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed it, the way it makes his body feel alive and real and in his skin. Severus casts quickly and Harry, whenever he feels like he wants to throw the Black magic, tosses his wand to the other hand.

"Resourceful," Severus says, and Harry knows it's a compliment. He stops, taking deep breath and feeling sweat under his hair.

"Had to," Harry gasps. "So I didn't ... the Black Magic."

"It was well considered," Severus' eyes are gleaming just like they did when he read Harry's OWLS. "Your grip strength has improved remarkably in your right hand. It is going to be more valuable for you to switch your wand holder to your left hand from now on if you intend to cast ambidextrously. The tremor there is still much more pronounced."

"Okay," Harry says breathlessly. Both of his hands are trembling. He can't help dropping the wand to the floor. Severus retrieves it and helps Harry put his wand holster on the other hand.

"I owe you an apology," Severus finishes and frowns down at his Prince ring. Harry can see the numbers that Harry's bracelet communicates to it jumping in shadowed form. "I have trained you too hard."

"It's fine. It's ... it's good to be learning stuff," Harry tries not to sway. His legs hurt.

Severus gestures his wand, holding Harry at his side as the furniture appears around them again. Harry immediately flops back down on the sofa. "I will retrieve your muscle balm."

"Okay," Harry yawns, holding his hands palms up as Severus moves around the kitchen, pulling out the right jar and then throwing it over to Harry. He catches it clumsily and tries to open the lid, but his fingers are trembling too much and they slip. "Shit."

"Allow me." Severus sits down on the coffee table and dips his fingers into the jar. The Black magic softly pulses out of Harry's skin and green sparks from the Slytherin magic dances up around his rune marks. Severus raises his eyebrows.

"Sorry," Harry winces. "It's hard, not using them."

Severus presses his thumbs into the heels of Harry's palms in a slow, steady massage that has Harry scrunching his face up in discomfort. Severus taught the massages to Remus but Remus is much more gentle. Then again, Harry's hands always feel better after Severus has done it.

"I will be clear, Harrison, that if your life is ever at risk you are to utilise *all* of your skills, including your heir magic, to save yourself." Severus' fingers pause where they are rubbing at the joint of Harry's wrist. "Say you understand."

"I understand," Harry sighs, looking at his arms and the soft glow of the Black magic. He starts to feel very sleepy and his head lolls against the back of the sofa. Severus notices.

"You should return to your dormitory."

Harry groans. He doesn't think he can summon the energy to walk back or to use the Hogwarts magic to beam himself up. Theo's always worried that he'll leave part of him stranded in the in-between, like splinching, and Harry is so tired he thinks that it's actually a possibility. Besides, the sofa is so bloody comfy.

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm ... I'm a bit tired," Harry confesses quietly. His heart is thumping. *Just fucking ask him, you wimp.* "Can I sleep here for a few hours? I'll set an alarm. I can get back in at like, five, before they wake up."

He expects Severus to say no but all he does is nod easily, picking up a large velvet cushion from the leather wing back chair and setting it at the end of the sofa. Harry gratefully flops sideways, kicking off his shoes and lying on his side with a yawn.

"I will wake you at five when I begin to brew," Severus says, reaching for a blanket.

"Thanks." Harry reaches for his journal and scribbles a quick message to Theo.

I'm sleeping at Severus'. I'll be back in the morning before everyone wakes up.

How's your nose? You've been there hours.

Severus has been teaching me defence. Are you okay?

I've been reading your copy of Advanced Potions Making. I see the former owner made some interesting adjustments.

They're all yours to use, Nott.

Sleep well, Potter.

Love you.

You too.

"Do you need a potion?" Severus asks him as Harry sets aside his journal.

"I don't think so," Harry's eyelids are heavy. He's not felt this tired in such a long time. Severus spreads the blanket on top of him and Harry quickly tucks it under his chin with a sigh. The blanket smells like rosemary and sage and smoke. *Of home.*

"You did well, *farzandam.*" Harry feels Severus cool, dry palm on his forehead. As he drifts towards sleep, he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: @elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website: emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

The Defence Professor

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Severus teaches his first Defence lesson.
Next time, Politics are afoot.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Harrison wakes at two in the morning in a nightmare, Severus calms him and administers potions before doing something he has been meaning to do since Harrison showed up at his door last night. He sends a message through the floo to Lupin.

He's sleeping at mine. Draco et al revealed themselves to be Death Eaters. Some kind of brawl. He is well. S.S.

Severus hesitates before sending it. He wants to tell Lupin about the training he has given their child tonight, at the exceptional voracious ability the child has demonstrated under Severus' tutelage, how every shield, even the most astonishing ones, were wordlessly cast by him after arduous attempts to find the right parseltongue expression. He and Harrison have talked in the past of the child's "ceiling" when it comes to magical capability. Severus has never found much joy in teaching defence - the endless repetition involved in simply learning spells is not as interesting to him as the subtle science of Potion making - but then Severus has never taught a Mage to duel before. Yet Severus realises, what he wants more than anything is share these things with Lupin in person. He wants to see Lupin's face when he hears of it. So he feeds the message into the floo. Given the lateness of the hour, Severus is surprised when a message comes back.

Have you spoken to him about the 'engagement?'- Remus

Severus is not surprised that this is at the forefront of Lupin's mind. After all, if Harrison had undertaken such a performance in order to protect Severus, he would be fuming. Likely, the wolf is awake with churning thoughts, worried about their child. He quickly pens something in return.

Yes. If the Contessa has no qualms, it seems like a worthwhile ruse to ensure your protection. And the Dark Lord knows. We cannot walk it back.

The speed at which the reply is sent is testament to how worried Lupin must be.

How do you know he knows?

Severus winces. This was one of the least pleasant moments of his evening, observing the arrival of the paper aeroplane on his child's plate and knowing exactly what it meant. He has not asked Harrison what the Dark Lord means by the phrase: "I like to keep such things close" but Severus knows enough to infer. The Dark Lord continues to taunt his son with things said during moments of torture. It is a cunning technique of psychological assault and if it were not being applied to his child, Severus might consider the commitment of it remarkable.

He sent a note to the child, as he did on his birthday.

The word that flies back through the floo makes Severus snort with laughter.

Motherfucker.

He smiles and scribbles something back.

We must consider the benefit to the situation. If the child is falsely engaged to the Zabini Heir at least he cannot become literally engaged to Theodore.

The response is fast, scrawled across the paper as if Lupin dashed it off.

Don't give me nightmares.

Severus laughs. He thinks of the child, plaintively asking if they could go home. *We*. It was that word that had nearly caused Severus to flinch in surprise; the willing verbalisation of the three of them as a group who share a home, a family unit. It had filled Severus with such a tenderness that he had almost struggled to continue to speak.

The child misses you, Severus pens. Thinking to himself; *I miss you too*, but being too cowardly to add them.

The response flies back out of the fire so quickly Severus wonders if Lupin really had time to read it.

I miss him. I miss you both. I miss your touch already.

Clearly, Remus Lupin is the braver of the two of them. Severus runs a finger over the last sentence with uncharacteristic sentimentality. Severus hesitates. Then he turns the slip of paper over and writes on the back. He feeds it into the fire without giving himself a chance to overthink it:

I am afflicted with a similar sentiment.

Severus catches an hour or so more of sleep before Harrison wakes a second time at four with a violent headache that has him moaning and hissing on the sofa. Severus administers quick potions and finds himself stroking Harrison's sweaty, swollen forehead to help him lull back to sleep. Since he will have to wake Harrison in an hour it hardly seems worth laying his head back down. Instead, he finds himself staring at the spare room in his quarters, full to the brim with research equipment and other junk. He's never really thought what to do with it, he has no need of a lab since he brews in his office or in the Potions classroom if necessary and he's hardly ever been in the position to entertain guests, but he's never had a teenage son who regularly struggles with sleep before. He stares at the back wall and the false window there, wondering if he could fit a bed in. He's surprised when he's poked in the leg by the long

finger nail of a house elf and a scowling Kreacher offers him a hot cup of mint tea. No doubt Lupin has sent him through from Venice, probably bribed to the teeth with Italian chocolates. Severus takes it wordlessly and then, sipping his tea, begins to sort through the piles of old mastery essays he has simply never taken the time to clear out. He barely notices that Kreacher has begun to pick up the rubbish around him, muttering quietly about how his Master's bed is too big for the tiny room.

"I will purchase a smaller one," Severus says. Kreacher doesn't look surprised by his contribution and merely nods.

"Bookcase too," Kreacher snaps, pointing to the opposite wall. "Cupboard and lamp."

"There is a second hand furniture store in Hogsmeade," Severus muses.

"Kreacher will go," Kreacher nods firmly. At that moment, he heard the floo burst into life in the next room. Severus moves swiftly in with the elf, seeing Harrison jerk awake, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Wassisit?" Harrison mumbles.

"Severus?" Albus' voice emerges from the floo.

"Christ," Harrison flops back down on the sofa, dropping a forearm over his face. "Fucking *terrible* alarm."

"Yes, Albus?" Severus sits in front of the fire on the coffee table, blocking Harrison from view as Albus' face swims briefly in the green flames. "It is very early for a floo."

"Harry is not in the dormitories of Slytherin or Gryffindor."

"Creepy," Harrison mutters.

"If my child chooses to sleep in my quarters, that is a parenting decision that is mine to make," Severus says steadily.

"I am still unsure of the wisdom of Harry remaining in Slytherin," Albus says quietly. "He has many enemies there."

"And friends," Severus adds.

"Not as many as he has in Gryffindor."

"I think you underestimate the resentment of the students of Gryffindor towards Sirius Black." Severus keeps his tone steady.

"Are you possibly projecting, Severus?"

"I am being as restrained as I can possibly be," Severus returns sharply. "But it is delusional to think that Lucius' carefully orchestrated media campaign against the reputation of Black has not had an impact on how Harrison is perceived."

"Harry has always been able to weather Rita Skeeter," Albus says, his tone quietly dismissive. Harrison snorts behind Severus and he determinedly does not look over his shoulder, knowing the boy will be rolling his eyes. "The Sorting Hat -,"

"Has that rag requested Harrison's presence, like last year?"

Albus pauses. Severus already knows the answer, otherwise, this would be a very different conversation.

"It has not," Albus says.

"Then since the child is unsorted still, we shall respect his choice and he has told me his preference." Severus stands up. "I must brew, Albus. Good morning."

"Good morning, Severus," Albus replies. "Enjoy your first day teaching."

Severus turns around. Harrison is sitting on the sofa with his snake wrapped around his neck, sipping a cup of tea. The reptile has clearly appeared from out of nowhere. Kreacher is polishing his school shoes.

"You will need to return to your habit of having your serpent elsewhere during the school day," Severus says. "It is dangerous to have an invisible familiar in a classroom where spells are flying. That aside from the fact that she is supposed to be Mr Nott's property."

"Yeah, I know," Harrison sighs miserably, stroking the serpents vibrant green scales. "It doesn't matter really, she can always talk to me, but it's nice to have her around. She's always on my side."

"Perhaps it will be different this year," Severus says quietly. "Perhaps when your official connection with Heir Zabini comes to light it will change the perception of the student body towards you."

"It's been two years since my name came out of the goblet. Nothing changes it," Harrison says wearily. "You told Dumbledore I wanted to be in Slytherin?"

"Since I will not endure another six months of you sleeping on the floor of the Gryffindor common room, I may have embellished what I had ... inferred of your preferences," Severus says. Harrison smirks.

"You didn't," he smiles. "I wanted to come back to Slytherin this year."

Severus is oddly proud, even though he knows that his child's reasons for choosing Slytherin are purely for Theodore, and allows himself the smallest smile.

"You are the heir of Slytherin. It is appropriate," Severus says.

"Yeah, and I'm *your* heir so it makes even more sense," Harrison yawns, completely unaware of how his words of casual acknowledgement have impacted Severus. *Yes, you are mine.* Harrison sets down his tea and pulls on his shoes. "I guess I'll see you in Defence."

“You will,” Severus takes a sip of his tea. “Remember: through not with.”

“Through not with,” Harrison cricks his neck to one side and then the other like he always does before he does something he views as challenging. Harrison sighs and stands up. “I’ll just ... head back through to the Slytherin dormitory.”

“Do you apparate?” Severus looks at him curiously. Apparition should be impossible on Hogwarts land but he knows that Harrison can move through the castle, can disappear and reappear at will but he’s never asked him how. *Perhaps I have been terrified of the answer.*

“Uh, I dunno, never tried, or, like, never consciously tried,” Harrison admits. “Theo thinks I can, I just can’t ... do it at will.”

Once again, Harrison’s magical instincts outweigh his actual skill and ability.

“Remember what Narcissa taught you: it is not enough to have power, you must control it too,” Severus says quietly. “We will find a time to practise. Perhaps Lupin can help, over Yule. You cannot be licensed until you are seventeen but it would be helpful, for emergencies.”

“Sure,” Harrison shrugs. “See you later.”

Severus is surprised when Harrison presses a hand against the wall behind him and then, with green magic (Slytherin magic, Severus realises) wrapping around him, Harrison begins to *disappear*. It’s nothing like an apparition, elf or otherwise, where the wixen is folded into the leylines or like a portkey which essentially uses portal travel movement through space too rapid for the eye to catch. This is slower and Severus realises must be built on entirely different premises. If all human bodies need a magical vehicle for spatial travel, be it leylines or portals, then Harrison is using *magic itself* as a vehicle and to do that, he cannot logically occupy his human form. So Severus stands, helpless, terror rising in him as he watches his child disassemble in front of him. He instinctively knows that it would be dangerous to halt the process but when Harrison’s face and green eyes finally dissolve, Severus has to set his mug down and move towards the place where his son recently stood, pressing his hand against the wall in horror. Severus rounds on the elf, since he is the only one in the room to round on.

“This is what he’s been doing?” Severus hisses. “*Dissolving* himself into magic?”

“Master is a child of Hogwarts, he has access to her secret magic,” Kreacher cackles. “He is a most terrifying Lord!”

“Will you please check that he has re-assembled somewhere?” Severus snaps.

“Lord Prince is foolish,” Kreacher smiles nastily. “Master has been travelling like this for *months*. ”

Kreacher laughs at Severus astounded expression and pops away into nothing. *For months. He’s been dangerously melting his form and soul into magic for months.*

“Little fucker,” Severus mutters, rubbing his hand over the patch of wall that Harrison touched. It is one more thing he needs to explain to Lupin. Sighing heavily, Severus reaches again for a slip of parchment and thinks that it is a very good thing that his floo is privately connected to Lupin’s address in Veince. He can tell they are going to get a lot of use out of them this year.

The first day of classes is always a blur but Severus is struggling most with accounting for the extra time it takes him to go upstairs to the Defence classroom. He had fought Albus on it, protesting that if Albus was forcing him to take the Defence job whilst keeping him on as the school Potion Master in all but name, he could at least allow Severus to teach Defence from his dungeon. Horace, however, was apparently unmovable. He wanted his old classroom. At least Severus has kept his office and quarters. As far as he knows, Horace has taken residence in an office and entire suite near Ravenclaw Tower and is using the former defence office, (which Severus still unhelpfully thinks as *Lupin’s office*) as storage. By lunchtime, Severus is thoroughly sick of stairs. To make it worse, he has to endure lunch beside Horace who is gushing about Theodore Nott.

“Such excellent technique!” Horace exclaims into his soup. “You know his father had little to no Potions technique, so he must have it from his mother but Medea was herself an average enough student, a remarkable healer, no doubt about it, but her skill in brewing was limited -,”

“Indeed,” Severus murmurs, thinking privately that Medea Nott likely flourished when out from under Slughorn’s tutelage and distracts himself by fixing his eyes on Harrison. He and Zabini seemed to have settled on a kind of uneasy truce where they sit at the end of a House table. Last night it was Slytherin with Theodore and Greengrass and Fitz-Tremblay. This morning it is the Gryffindor table and Zabini is the only green tie in a small bunch of Gryffindors. Harrison is sandwiched between his pretend fiancé and his sister. Severus notices that Granger has poured Harrison a bowl of soup but he’s only playing with it. Zabini pushes a cup of juice towards him and Harrison sips it. Severus frowns. Harrison’s attitude to food has vastly improved in the last months of his recovery but this lacklustre attitude is familiar to how Harrison was eating after Yule last year, when he first had to wear his true face to school. Severus glances down the Gryffindor table and sees many angry pairs of eyes looking down towards Harrison. They are full of curiosity and some, resentment. Young Finnegan looks outraged simply to be sharing a table space with Harrison and Zabini.

“It’s remarkable to me the things he comes up with,” Horace goes on. “I caught him adding a clockwise stir every seventh stir, that natural rhythm, that natural instinct, its something I’ve not seen anyone do since *you* came into my classroom, Severus!”

Severus pauses. Whilst he doesn’t doubt Theodore’s natural talent he knows where that particular instinct has come from. Clearly, Harrison has been sharing Severus’ old Potions book.

“They are an odd set, aren’t they?” Horace chuckles to himself. “Malfoy and Potter-Black, at such odds!”

“It’s good to mix them up,” Severus says quietly. “They tend to herd into their houses otherwise.”

“Oh, of course I did, I put them with a student from an opposite house. I don’t know them very well yet, but I have always been good at picking oppositional partners,” Horace chuckles. “Malfoy and Corner, Bones and Boot, Goldstein and Greengrass, Macmillan and Patil, Granger and Zabini, Nott and Potter-Black.”

Severus is fighting both amusement and irritation. On the one hand, the notion that Horace has paired Harrison and Theodore together as ‘opposites’ (when they are two traumatised peas in a pod) is absolutely laughable, but the recitation of the NEWT class, a class that should rightly be his is maddening. Of course, under his purview the likes of Harrison and Draco wouldn’t have made it into the NEWT Potions program, but still. The lure of a small, intimate class in an elite subject is painful. He has carefully curated a reputation for the Potions program at Hogwarts so that only students who are superb and who are dedicated enough to the practise to endure him as a teacher will thrive in the upper years. Consequently, Hogwarts produces some of the finest brewers in Europe at a Mastery level, a fact of which Severus is both proud and jealous. Students may not like him, he will never win awards for teacher of the year (thank Circe Hogwarts does not dabble in such soppily applied pandering to ego) but he knows that students who graduate from his NEWT class in their seventh year can easily go up against the best from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. It is a fierce reputation that he has painstakingly cultivated but conversely, the Hogwarts Defence Against the Dark Arts program has no such rigour. Any student with an Exceeds Expectations can waltz in. Severus has seen his class list. It is a swarm of Gryffindors and Slytherins and not enough Ravenclaws. It will be unruly and likely he will fail many of them out at the end of the year just to thin down to a class which can excel at the final exam.

“He won my felix, y’know,” Horace says conspiratorially. “It could have been a close run thing, I thought, what with Granger being my new muggleborn surprise, but his was by far the best.”

Severus tries not to grimace at the familiar nickname that once belonged to Lily.

“How was Nott’s partner?” Severus asks, since there seems to be no other way to ask after Harrison’s progress more discreetly.

“Potter-Black?” Horace slurps his soup. “Some natural aptitude, nothing remarkable to nurture, nothing like Lily, but then I suppose, he’s not Lily’s anymore, is he?”

Yes he is, Severus thinks fiercely. But now he is also mine.

“Sirius Black and James Potter were no Potions masters in the making,” Horace shakes his head. “Not like Lily, though she chose charms, not like you, Severus! You outshone them all in the end! I knew you would.”

Severus winces. It’s hurtful, to have Lily’s name thrown around so carelessly. She was one of Slughorn’s too at one point, given attention and laurels that Severus never had, and Severus hates that Horace is now reflecting on Severus’ own prowess as his own. Severus had not been one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, nor had he been the ‘Muggleborn Surprise’ that Lily

had been. Horace had not deemed Severus' background remarkable enough to deserve nurturing, preferring to sit back and see if he flourished or failed and then take credit if it happened to be the first. Severus resents him for it, resents him far too much to sit and continue talking about it.

"Excuse me," he stands up. "I must prepare for this afternoon."

Severus stands behind the desk and watches Harrison's 6th year class file into the classroom.

"There will be assigned seating," Severus says quietly, tapping a finger against the board and the seating chart he has written on it. Quietly, they all move. Severus has deliberately put Harrison at the end of the second row closest the door so that he can see all of the students and feel safe close to the exit. He has seated him next to Bones, who Severus knows Harry has a treaty with. Severus addresses the class, explains his expectations.

"Non verbal magic is the cornerstone of a battle. Those who cannot achieve it, die. So you will therefore give this skill the attention and gravitas it deserves. Those who do not shall meet with my displeasure."

Looking around the group, he knows Harrison can already achieve this, but he suspects Zabini also. The *Donas de Fuera* are notorious for training their children in defensive arts in a myriad of secret ways.

"One partner will attempt to jinx the other without speaking and the other will attempt to repel the jinx. The jelly legs jinx or the stinging hex are the only acceptable jinxes. I will assign the partners."

He sees many Gryffindors rolling their eyes and many Slytherins looking excited by the chance to attempt to silently curse their partners. As expected, Severus pairs them with students outside of their house. He knows they will think it is because he is vindictive and has no problem with that. For most students, the desire to impress an unfamiliar or hostile opponent is a stronger magical motivator than the desire to master a skill. He sees that Finnegan is shooting Harrison particularly aggressive looks and Severus thinks he will do as a partner for Harrison, since the young Gryffindor clearly has a vendetta against his son. Severus pairs them up, keeping Draco as far away from Harrison as possible and making Weasley Draco's partner. They are both at such a level that he doubts either of them will succeed in casting anything non-verbal today.

As Severus walks around the classroom, he sees that his expectations were more than appropriate. Students fall into a few categories when first attempting non-verbal casting. Most of the students have a frustrated, constipated look on their faces, like Longbottom and Weasley and Goyle. Students like Greengrass and Nott and Goldstein have a certain, deadly look as if they are contemplating murder the longer they are not successful. Others are like Granger and Draco and Finnegan, fury is etched into their faces. Facing Zabini, who is giving Granger a light stare of amusement as he wordlessly protects himself against her jinxes and hits her with his own, Severus can tell she will predictably be able to shield in less than five minutes, probably driven mainly by the desire to wipe that expression off Zabini's face. Then

there is Harrison. Face entirely impassive, barely moving his wand in his hand as he produces a shield again and again and shoots stinging jinxes, but Severus can see he is deliberately missing because he does not want to hurt Finnegan. Severus frowns. If the Dark Lord does not see Harrison being adequately challenged, he will certainly find Severus wanting. Severus looks around the room. He notices that Vincent Crabbe is delighting in cheating, muttering spells under his breath or mouthing them as he shoots jinxes Severus did not approve at Longbottom, who is struggling to shield every one.

“Finnegan,” Severus snaps, standing in front of Harrison and his partner. “Partner Longbottom. Crabbe, come here.”

Crabbe looks overjoyed with the opportunity. Harrison’s face does not move. He is holding himself lightly, casually flipping his wand in his right hand, his left fingers trembling more than usual. Severus is glad he is wearing his wand holster on his left. As far as Severus knows, he has not yet had to switch to ambidextrous casting. This is good, Severus thinks, because it shows him that Harrison has not lost control of his urge to use the Black magic.

“Go,” Severus says, folding his arms and watching them. It immediately becomes clear that someone has been teaching Vincent Crabbe to fight. By the style of it, Severus doesn’t think it is Crabbe senior who is as similarly blunt but lacks this kind of deliberate aggression. Severus thinks he sees hints of Dolohov’s style in this, which makes sense since he is Vincent’s godfather. Severus obviously says nothing about Vincent’s cheating and concentrates instead upon Harrison. He finds himself filling slowly with pride.

Harrison’s mouth never opens. He does not move too much, conserving energy and keeping his stance loose, just as Severus taught him last night. As Vincent blusters and cheats, Harrison becomes more controlled, more focused. *I shall have to show Lupin a memory of this*. At no point does he lose control and let the heir magic burst from his fingers, though Severus can see his Black diamond glowing fiercely on his hand. Severus is unsure how long he should let it go on for, concerned for Harrison’s self control but then Vincent loses his patience.

“*Astaroth incendo!*” Vincent shouts. Severus’ stomach lurches, he sees the purple fire leap out of Vincent’s wand, one of Dolohov’s favourites and knows he must intervene, no matter what the Dark Lord wishes, but Harrison’s eyes widen and he hisses. Severus recognises the particular intonation of that parseltongue: *The protego diabolica*. Dark fire erupts in a circle around him, causing the other pairs to scramble away from Vincent and Harrison with shouts and loud swearing.

“That’s the *Protego Diabolica!*” Tracey Davies yells from the other side of the room.

“That’s a *dark spell!*” Patil shrieks.

Severus could roll his eyes at the predictability of this. Across the room, he sees Theodore do exactly that.

“Yeah? And what about what *he* did?” Weasley yells, pointing at Vincent. “That’s not a jinx, that’s a fucking *curse!*”

No doubt Weasley's older brothers have told him about their unfortunate tango with Dolohov in the Department of Mysteries.

"He used parseltongue!" Finnegan bellows, glaring at Harrison with wicked intensity. "It's *evil!*"

"Silence!" Severus commands. The room falls silent, aside from the odd roaring and prickling sound of Harrison's and Vincent's spells. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley, for bad language, and for you both ..."

Severus looks at the two of them. Vincent is staring at the black flame protecting Harrison, watching as his purple fire from Dolohov's curse is swallowed quickly up by it. Severus glares at Harrison but tightens the tether between them, hoping to tell his child he is satisfied with his performance.

"Cease," Severus says quietly. The whole room falls silent. Harrison draws a deep breath and closes his eyes for a second but miraculously, does not hiss. Non-verbally, he draws the shield of flame back inside his wand. Then his eyes fix on Severus'. Behind his eyes, Severus can see three words scrawled there for Severus to pluck out. *Through, not with*. Severus cannot nod at him but he stares at his son for a brief second, hoping that the pause is enough for Harrison to know that he approves. More than that, he is internally combusting with roaring pride. If Severus could leave words behind his own eyes they would say: *Well done*. Suddenly, Draco speaks into the stunned quiet of the whole class staring at the burn marks on the floor between Vincent and Harrison.

"Couldn't beat Vince in a fair fight, could you, Potter-Black?" Draco drawls. "Had to use a dark spell? Did your dead *Daddy* teach you that one?"

"Shut *up*, Malfoy," Harrison bursts out, a flare of white light bolting out of his Black ring towards Draco, causing more screams and yells. Severus sighs internally. *And it was going so well*. In the corner, Severus notices a mild tensing across Theodore's face. No doubt, Theodore is the only one who knows what is at stake in Harrison's performance in this lesson.

"You're a joke!" Draco yells from behind Gregory.

"I'm a joke?" Harrison unwisely returns. "At least I can cast a fucking *shield* rather than using a human one!"

"Don't, Harry!" Granger is quickly by his side, holding his left hand with a wince. From Severus' experience, he knows that Harrison will be so cold to the touch it almost burns.

"Enough," Severus calls calmly. "Five points from Slytherin, Crabbe, for improper spell use -,," he ignores the outraged mutterings of the class and the unfair punishment, "and you -,," he nods at Harrison. He still finds it virtually impossible to call Harrison *Potter-Black* under any circumstances. "Stay after class. I believe a detention is in order."

There is an outbreak of mutterings around the classroom but they are not in the same dissatisfied whispers as they were when he punished Vincent. Clearly, whilst the collective of

students generally feels that Vincent should have been punished harsher for his actions they do not feel that Harrison's punishment is unearned, even though any rational adult wixen would see that it was. Harrison clearly acted in self-defence, so why do the students milling around Severus continue to shoot distasteful glares at him? He notices how many of the students snort when they see Harrison clenching and unclenching his left hand, drawing the Black magic back inside him, as if his prowess is not remarkable but irritating and suspect. Severus observes the way Zabini moves closer and how the other students watch the pair of them like they are sharks, deadly and untrustworthy. For the first time, Severus understands what this is.

Fear.

This year, Harrison's classmates fear him more than they did before and their fear makes them cruel and above all, constantly observant. They watch him, every moment, as if seeking weaknesses. Whilst Severus knows that they see Harrison as a dangerous predator in their mix, Severus knows Harrison probably is overwhelmed by the feeling of being prey to so many pairs of eyes. *No wonder he is finding it so fucking hard to eat.*

The bell rings for afternoon break and Severus waves his wand, bringing the desks back to their places.

"You are dismissed," he calls but points at Harrison. "You are not."

Harrison rolls his eyes churlishly but obediently slumps against his chair, leaning back on it. He nods curtly to Granger and to Zabini as they both place their hands on his shoulder as they pass. He sees how Harrison does not look at Theodore at all. He is reminded, suddenly and violently, of how intentional Severus was in his second and third year to never, ever look at Lupin all the while somehow managing to have him constantly in his field of vision. When the class has filed out and Severus has closed the door and cast a silencing and locking spell, all of Harrison's arrogant body language disappears. He leans forward, his elbows on the desk and rubs his face.

"I know, I know," Harrison mutters. "I fucked up."

"Language," Severus says quietly. "You cannot let Draco infuriate you."

"Then he should be bloody less infuriating," Harrison scowls down at the desk. Both of his hands are trembling. "I didn't mean to cast that shield. But I recognised the *sound* of it, y'know, that curse, it - I dunno, it sounded like the Ministry and for a second, I thought ... I dunno what I thought."

Severus is glad, suddenly, of the training Harrison undertook with Bane and Weasley in the summer, even if it has prompted a kind of remembered trauma. Harrison's ability to recognise spells has saved him today.

"You did the right thing," Severus sits on the edge of the desk in front of Harrison's. "You likely did see or hear it in the Ministry. It's a family curse of Dolohov's and deadly when used correctly."

“Jesus,” Harrison looks up at Severus bleakly. “Crabbe just tried to kill me?”

“I do not believe he knew it, but yes,” Severus admits. It is a galling thought. Harrison laughs mirthlessly and shakes his head.

“Will it be enough?” He asks quietly. “To keep Tom happy?”

“I am sure it will be,” Severus hesitates. “There may be some ... pushback from Albus if he hears you used this spell in the classroom.”

“I’m not going to tell him,” Harrison says baldly. “Are you?”

“No,” Severus shakes his head. “You did well, *farzandam*. ”

“Yeah?” Harrison sighs and rubs his scar. “Even though I wanted to throw Malfoy out of the window?”

Severus isn’t surprised that was the thought behind the sudden expulsion of Black magic. He is surprised that Harrison had the self-control *not* to make it happen.

“Why did you not?” Severus asks.

“Because he’s under my fucking Sanctuary and it would fuck everything up, wouldn’t it?” Harrison groans, thumping his head down on the desk. “I told Narcissa I would protect him. I promised to ... shelter him. Not that he deserves it. Wanker.”

“Language,” Severus says wearily, since it is definitely a losing battle wherever Draco is concerned. “I appreciate you have ... frustrations with his conduct under your Sanctuary but the self-control we discussed, it must also extend to Draco. His mind is vulnerable to the Dark Lord.”

“So you think that if I do the wings and stuff in front of him, Tom will see it in Draco’s mind?” Harrison mumbles into the desk. “He’ll use legilimency on him, not just you?”

“The new Death Eaters are vulnerable,” Severus tries not to think about how uncomfortable it makes him, these children joining the military ranks of wixen six or seven times their age. “The Dark Lord is nothing but thorough. If he truly wishes to monitor your magical abilities, he will not simply trust the information I gather.”

“So he’ll use them all,” Harrison mutters.

“He would be foolish not to,” Severus says quietly.

“So I can’t do the extra hurricane Black magic in public anymore,” Harrison thumps his head against the desk again. Severus is not sure where this term comes from but he cannot deny how appropriate it feels. “Or the Slytherin magic, he knows what that looks like and he thinks he took it from me already. In the cage.”

“That is correct,” Severus nods. “Though I will be as clear as possible, if your life is ever in danger -,”

“Yeah, yeah, throw the kitchen sink at him,” Harrison groans and lifts his head. His forehead is smeared with blood from his scar. “But use my wand stuff first, right?”

He looks so tired, so world-weary with blood on his face that Severus as to fight the urge to cup Harrison’s face like he sometimes does between the child’s nightmares. It is not a tenderness that Harrison will endure in the waking hours so, wordlessly, Severus pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and a bottle of murtlap essence from his robes. He tips some onto the handkerchief and offers it to Harrison.

“Tomorrow night you will have detention,” Severus says quietly.

“We’ll train again?” Harrison asks eagerly, wiping his forehead. Severus nods.

“Non-verbal offensive spells,” Severus says. “We will expand your repertoire of what you are comfortable casting with your wand. You will not be unprepared to defend yourself, if necessary.”

“I still like heir magic better,” Harrison mutters. “Hands and rings are easier than wands.”

“For Mages, maybe,” Severus says drily.

“Did I get it all?” Harrison demands, offering the handkerchief back to Severus and turning his face towards him, eyes closed expectantly. Severus hesitates for a millisecond to appreciate this moment of raw, uncomplicated trust. Then, he sits on the edge of Harrison’s desk and gently wipes the last smear of blood from his child’s eyebrow before pressing the damp fabric to the scar.

“It is best to let murtlap settle,” Severus says as Harrison lets out a slow breath. Severus watches his shoulders relax for a second and absorbs the feeling of it. Harrison, unguarded and unworried around him. Severus does not think it will ever stop being miraculous.

“They all think I’m weird,” Harrison whispers. Severus pauses but Harrison keeps his eyes closed. “I am weird, aren’t I?”

“You are a Mage, *farzandam*,” he says softly. “That makes you unique, not odd.”

Harrison smirks and Severus has the gentle pleasure of knowing he has made his child smile.

“If there was another Mage would you have to guard them too? Like, another me?” Harrison asks.

“Fates forbend,” Severus says drily.

“Rude,” Harrison mutters, eyes still closed as Severus holds the handkerchief in place. “But as the Princes, are we supposed to guard other Mages?”

Severus feels a warm thrill, the same he always feels when his child asks about their family.

“The Princes have not guarded the Mages in generations,” Severus says quietly. “Since before they left Iran.”

“Are there more Mages there?”

“I do not know,” Severus’ words are hesitant. He remembers the stories told to him at bedtime. “The lore that Eileen shared with me was that millennia ago, there were more Mages in the part of the world we lived and where there were Mages there were Princes to guard them. I do not know how accurate that claim is or if it were merely a fable of our own people. It is possible that there are others.”

Severus admits to himself that the possibility of other Harrisons in the world is a mite terrifying.

“I’d ... like to find them,” Harrison mumbles. “I’d ... like to know more.”

“What would you like to know?” Severus pulls the handkerchief away and soaks it again. Harrison’s eyes open and follow his movement.

“I dunno, I guess ... I guess I’d want to know about Mages here in Britain first, like, if there were other ones before Merlin and Dee and ... I dunno, really. Do some research,” Harrison mumbles, blushing as if he’s said too much. Severus does not know how to tell him how eager he is to hear Harrison even considering any type of future plan.

“Speak, *farzandam*,” Severus urges. *Tell me what will happen when you live. Believe you will live.*

“Marina said she would take me to the Chained Library, so maybe there?” Harrison pushes on, his eyes fixed on the desk. “Like, I’d want to know as much as I could so that, I dunno, if I ever met another Mage, if they even exist, like ... maybe I could guard them.”

"Guard them?"

"Yeah, like you do. Like *we* do, the Princes," Harrison's eyes dart up to Severus' face and then away, sheepishly. "I'm a Prince too, right? I dunno, we could, like, guard them together."

Harrison’s voice disappears into a mumble and he stares, blushing, at his fingers. Severus does not know how to adequately express the tumble of feelings inside. *We guard the Mages, Sev.* He cannot imagine what Eileen would think of this, of a Prince who is both the thing they guard and wanting to be a guardian, but Eileen is not here and Severus is. There is a resounding roar of joy inside of him that he thinks even ten rounds of the Dark Lord’s crucio would be unable to quench. This is a future possibility his child is genuinely considering and it is a future that *involves* Severus.

“Yes. You are a Prince too,” Severus says. Harrison won’t look up into his face, he is clearly too embarrassed and Severus does not know how to reassure him or put words to his jubilation. *We could guard them together.* So Severus carefully offers the sodden handkerchief towards his child’s face and his son nods, wordlessly, and relaxes when Severus gently presses the fabric to the slightly swollen skin. “You have a class now?”

“A free period,” Harrison’s voice sounds drowsy.

“Go and sleep for forty minutes,” Severus commands, gently taking hold of the boy’s elbow and pulling him up to his feet. “You have worked hard.”

"Thanks," Harrison says, slinging the satchel with the marking *L.E.* embossed onto the leather. Severus wonders if Lily would look at them, at the gentle giving and accepting of compliments that would have been unthinkable a year ago and be proud. If she watches Harrison carefully construct a possible future where *Severus* is still in his life. *He wants me in his future, Lily. I will make sure he has one.*

“Harrison," Severus says.

“Yeah?” The child turns at the door.

“I like to keep such things close,” Severus quotes softly. Harrison’s eyes harden. “Will you explain it to me?”

Harrison sighs and looks down at the door handle. When he speaks, his voice is rough with emotion.

“He said that just because I had the power to ‘vanquish’ him, doesn’t mean he has to destroy me. That he likes to keep ...”

“Such things close,” Severus finishes for him. That word, *vanquish*, opens up a chasm of grief inside Severus. Instantly, he is thrown back in time, tucked away inside the Hogshead, listening breathlessly to Sybil Trelawney’s prophecy, then thrown out into the snow by Aberforth.

Tell him, a voice whispers inside. If Severus was so inclined, he might even believe it could be Lily.

“The word ‘vanquish’ is a reference to the prophecy you destroyed,” Severus says, trying to keep his voice devoid of any anxious tone.

“Yeah,” Harrison’s eyes hold his gaze steadily. “I thought it might be.”

Harrison destroyed the prophecy. He does not want to hear the words and Severus does not want to repeat them.

“The Dark Lord does not know who you are,” Severus holds his son’s gaze. “He imagines he does, that the prophecy has set you on a path he can predict, but he does not.”

“Yeah,” Harrison’s lip quirks sardonically. “I’m not set in stone, right?”

Severus is touched that Harrison remembers.

“You are not set in stone, *farzandam*,” Severus repeats. Harrison nods firmly and gives Severus a strange, and rather confusing look.

“Neither are you,” Harrison blurts out, before turning and striding out of the door.

Severus sits and stares at the door as it swings closed. He does not think anyone has ever said anything so breathtakingly kind and absurd to him. For nearly twenty years, since he Eileen died and he decided to follow the Dark Lord, Severus has been tied to a certain future, all other possibilities snatched away from him by his own betrayals and foolish adolescent choices. Yet Harrison, who has suffered the most consequences of those choices, does not believe he is defined by them. It is riddiculous, it is unfathomable, but the hint of absolution hidden inside it is like water to a dying man.

He will live, Lily, Severus thinks as he lets the fourth years into the classroom. Then Severus allows himself to imagine, just briefly, what it could be like if, against all the odds and the justice of his failings, he lived too.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta:@elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website:emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Cortem Black et Zabini

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

Three chapters this week.

This time, a Witch Weekly article comes out.
Next time, Dumbledore and Harry have a meeting.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gwion,

I hear you are to be congratulated. The winner of Professor Slughorn's Felix is always the most promising NEWT student. Please enjoy this book from my own collection which explores the creation of the potion in question. I hear from my son that a prominent engagement has recently been announced at Hogwarts. Please offer Mr Zabini my congratulations. I will admit, I assumed his affections were lodged elsewhere. How is your mind shield?

Ever your servant,

Lady Macbeth

My lady,

Thank you for this interesting missive. It is the first time I have received a letter by corvid or in Ancient Greek. I wonder if this is the new language we will communicate in. I will pass on your congratulations to Mr Zabini and his paramour. Their mutual affections are unchanged. My mind shield grows stronger though luckily, I find I have little use for it at present.

Your servant,

Gwion

Gwion,

Your reply was satisfactory. How is your Aramaic?

I find that most children if they lay hands on a missive not their own shall have their curiosity dulled by the presentation of a language they do not understand and a good correspondent changes languages frequently for privacy. Let us see how sharp your skills are, Gwion.

Corvids are intelligent and secretive and the perfect carriers for messages if they can be persuaded to serve you. Children of the House of Black have always had this talent.

I am glad to hear that you are not having to utilise your mind shield frequently but I would also remind you that a proficient wixen does not need to be a Master of the Mental Arts in order to use the legilimency charm. As the House of Zabini positions herself away from neutrality, you stand upon the knife edge. Do not let Sutr's sword inside your mind grow dull.

Ever your servant,

Lady Macbeth

My lady,

I confess I have not considered that there may be other legilimens inside Hogwarts aside from those known to me. I feel less as if I stand upon the edge of a knife and more as if the blade hangs above me. Still, my vows hold me and my honour to the House of Zabini is based on not only on politics but on fraternity.

Your servant,

Gwion

Gwion,

I know you read Pict so let us practise together.

Professor Slughorn is a powerful wixen, Gwion. Utilise your shield. Here is a lesson my father taught me: Every Lord who sits on the Wizengamot agrees to take a seat under the sword of Damocles.

Ever your servant,

Lady Macbeth

My lady,

It seems to be a heavy inditement of our government if it can be compared to the luxury and ruthlessness of Dionysus. The revelation that Professor Slughorn could have an interest in my mind or the mind of other students is disquieting.

Your servant,

Gwion.

Gwion,

My father taught me many things. How to write in the Cyrillic alphabet was among them. Were you also taught this beautiful language?

With our modern civilisation, it is easy for us to forget that within our society we cultivate pure chaos and tame the wild powers of the earth. When a person emerges with the possibility to wield those powers, to unleash them upon us all, then the sword is lowered.

But we are wixen. Without the sword there is no magic, so the sword will always be there.

Professor Slughorn enjoys amassing alliances through mutual benefit. Sometimes, mutually assured benefit can only be garnered through the stealing of secrets.

Enjoy your role as the latest assistant. Do not neglect Runes in favour of Potions.

Ever your servant,

Lady Macbeth

My Lady,

My father taught me many things, too. How to live under the sword was one of them. He did not teach me Cyrillic, however, so please forgive my poor penmanship. I have borrowed a book from Heir Zabini who has more knowledge of early Slavic scripts. I am grateful for your warnings and correspondence. As for Runes, I would never dream of neglecting the discipline. After all, I have evidence first-hand of how powerful Runes Masters can be.

Gwion.

— — —

Dear Remus,

I'm bribing Kreacher to carry letters back and forth because Blaise says Hedwig could be in danger of flying to Venice, especially with Lucius Malfoy being such a dick. So she's just doing my UK letters and spending loads of time hanging out with the Twins in London. They feed her doughnuts. If you're trying to bribe Kreacher, sugared almonds are a hit.

My first week has been shit. Everyone's talking about me again. It's so boring. Like, Malfoy's Grandad literally kept Veela in a sex dungeon according to Magnus, isn't that more interesting?

Defence Against the Dark Arts is going okay. Did the Shadowman tell you the plan? I'm doing alright at it, I think. Although I did nearly throw Malfoy out of the window with the Black magic the other day. This Sanctuary idea has gotten old really fucking quickly.

I know you've heard about my 'engagement' (I'm not calling it that, I'm saying that we're 'promised') but it was not my idea. Also, it's a good plan and I've gone and done it anyway so you can't be mad.

How's your new job as Counsellor? Enjoying being European?

I miss you a lot,

Harry

Harry,

I fear that people will always be able to find reasons to hate you. You are powerful and kind and unfortunately, very famous. Believe me when I say I know something of notoriety. I won't tell you to ignore it, because it is impossible to ignore slander, but I will tell you not to take it to heart. You cannot control what they say about you, cub, but you can control whether or not you carry it with you.

I find my new job suits me. I am primarily based in the council chambers in Venice. I spend a lot of my time reading and compiling inquiries and concerns from the European Creatures into memos to present to the rest of the council. I find I enjoy everything about being European. Spending time with other creatures who do not have to fear how their status may be received by wixen is liberating. In fact, there are only two things lacking from my existence here. Two people, I should say. I miss you both horribly.

As for your being promised to Heir Zabini, rest assured, I can be made sufficiently mad.

All my love,

Remus

Rems,

So this second week is just as shit. Slughorn is obsessed with trying to get me into his little club (Blaise and Hermione and Theo went on Sunday night and I pretended I had a headache so I could eat smarties with Kreacher) but I think he's weird. He calls Blaise and I 'the golden couple,' Theo 'the prodigy,' Hermione 'the muggleborn surprise' and Ginny 'the firecracker.' It's weird. So don't be mad at me, being fake-promised to Blaise is not fun at all. For starters, he makes me brush my hair because he says I 'can't walk around looking both hapless and hopeless all my life.' You should pity me if anything.

Maybe it'll be a good thing, you living in Venice. You've got a house in France too. I've never been to France, but I might like it there. Kreacher's told me about it, he says it has lots of space and it's on the river. That sounds nice, Moony. We could have a good life there.

I miss you so fucking much. I miss the home we had. That's never happened before.

Love you,

Harry

P.S. Don't be mad about the Blaise stuff. I don't want to be doing it. It makes me miss Cedric. I know that's weird so don't tell anyone.

Harry,

I have also felt more at home in the last few months than ever before. It is both painful to lose it but also lovely to have had it. I have not had a chance to visit the house at Angouleme but I think we could be happy there too.

Professor Slughorn has always had favourites. I was never amongst them and he adored Slytherins, as he was their head of House. He called Lily "The Muggleborn Surprise," too. It seems he recycles nicknames. He coveted Sirius. Padfoot always found him weird and whilst he was not always the best judge of character, you couldn't fault his nose. Slughorn is not a man to trust.

I'm going to be clear on this bit, Harry. The way things happened at the station wasn't your fault, I am not mad about that. I understand your feelings and your instinct to protect me but you must try to remember now that I am your legal parent. I protect you, cub. Not the other way around.

Can you remember that for me?

As for your feelings about Cedric, it is not weird. It is natural. Grief has its own method, Harry, and grieving isn't shameful. Of course I will not tell anyone but please remember that if you really do not want this 'fake engagement,' if it is causing you pain then the Contessa and I will find an alternative path forward.

As for looking both 'hapless and hopeless,' you can tell Mr Zabini that it has served me well so far in life!

I love you tremendously,

Remus

Remus,

It's not causing me pain, I'm fine. I mean, not exactly. Is it weird that I keep thinking about how Cedric had all these dreams for us, and even though now I don't want them, (like, the idea of getting actually engaged to anyone freaks me the fuck out, I'm so not ready for that) I'm still really sad that none of his got to come true?

Quidditch tryouts are this Sunday. Ron's going out for keeper again so I've been giving him tips, mainly about his nerves. I've taught him some of the breathing stuff you taught me. Ginny's decided to go out for seeker again so I've been going down to the pitch with her just to give her all the tips and tricks for the firebolt. I miss flying. I'm going to watch them all at tryouts and try not to get too depressed about it.

I love you too,

Harry

My cub,

It is not weird to grieve for a life lost, an entire life. Cedric may have had dreams that were not your dreams. Not wanting those dreams (particularly around marriage and engagement) does not make you a bad person. It does not mean that you do not grieve him and by the same measure, grieving for Cedric's lost dreams does not mean you do not love Theodore.

Having said that, I know I speak for both the Shadowman and myself when I say it is completely natural for a sixteen-year-old to not feel ready for a life-long bond (I recognise the strangeness of saying that to the only person to have a fidelity bond in nearly a thousand years but I stand by it) and no one says you ever have to do it at all.

Try and have fun at tryouts. Remember that your support means the world to Ron and Ginny. If that doesn't work, remember that soon you may be able to stretch your own wings.

And that I love you, tremendously.

Remus

Tad,

You're good at this. Dad stuff.

I trust yours and Padfoot's noses, and I promise to remember everything you've told me.

I will haplessly and hopelessly try to have a good time tomorrow.

(That's my way of saying I love you tremendously too).

Harry

- - - - -

Milord,

*We write with good(ish) news and sweets for Kreacher (**I promised Kreacher sweets**) Fred will promise anyone sweets. **The good news is that I've had some interest in a no-wands treaty from Belinda Wildsmith** - remember, Harry, we talked to her before the Wizengamot started? - **I've sent the info across to Blaise and we both agree you should try having a chat with her this weekend if you're up for it.** I think she could be pushed towards a bear wands and then we would have a pretty powerful neutral seat onboard. With Daphne, that basically gives us the neutral faction and if Nott keeps pushing towards neutral then that will only strengthen it.*

In terms of the Heirs, here's who we haven't got yet:

Sylvia Kettleburn, Heir to the House of Kettleburn (1 st year Raven)

Tara Ogden, Heir to the House of Ogden (2 nd year Huff - the one who's so friendly with Mini Selwyn)

Flora and Hestia Carrow, joint Heirs to the House of Carrow (They're 4 th year Snakes and I'm honestly not sure where they stand - I think they're maybe Junior Death Eaters in the making but check with Blaise)

Siobhan Brocklehurst, Heir to the House of Brocklehurst (Pretty sure she's a 5 th year Raven, in Ginny's year).

Millicent Bulstrode, Lord Apparent to the House of Bulstrode (In your year, Snake obviously, maybe one of Voldy's?)

Padma Patil, Heir to the House of Patil (your year and Ron's date!)

Torquil Travers, Heir to the House of Travers (Beauxbatons - possibly Voldy's?)

Elise Marchbanks, Heir to the House of Marchbanks (she's much older than us, obviously, but her mother's seat is stoically light, it always votes with Dumbledores. ***Seems like that might be a bad thing?***)

Vincent Crabbe, Heir to the House of Crabbe (any thoughts on him? Maybe like Goyle)

Marcus Flint, Heir to the House of Flint (we think he's a Death Muncher)

Cornelius Tremblay, Heir to the House of Tremblay (I saw him in Diagon Alley with his sleeve up. Definitely Death Munching)

Pansy Parkinson, Heir to the House of Parkinson (Daphne wrote to tell me that Parkinson's been marked?? This seems insane).

Apollo Mulciber, Heir to the House of Mulciber (He's clearly team Voldy but to what extent?)

Marina Ollivander, Heir to the House of Ollivander - Harry, aren't you guys mates?

Felix Rosier, Heir to the House of Rosier (We can't find anything out about him except that he's a wanker)

Draco Malfoy, Heir to the House of Malfoy - what's going on with this Harry? George says he's under your protection but he's still being a dick? Also, just to let you know we spotted him sneaking around Knockturn Alley the day before term started. We've got some good connections down there (***for obvious reasons***) and we hear he was purchasing something from Borgin and Burke's. He's clearly planning some little shitty scheme so keep your eyes open, milord. Anyway, that's our not-good news to go with the good-ish news.

Write back soon,

Have a good first week and give them hell,

George Weasley, Heir and Guardsman to the House of Black

Fred Weasley, Guardsman to the House of Black

Dear Fred and George

Reading a letter from both of you at once gives me a headache. Have you ever heard of paragraphs? I talked to Blaise about Wildsmith. She's been made Head Girl. We're going to talk to her at the Quidditch tryouts on Sunday. Did you hear Ron's going out for keeper and Ginny's going out for seeker? I'm not sure who's going out for beater but I hear promising things about Peakes in third year.

I've given the list to Blaise but I've got some news for you; Parkinson's not the only marked student. Malfoy, Rosier, Crabbe and Goyle are all marked. It's a fun dormitory vibe. Mainly I've been hanging out downstairs with Blaise and Theo until they've fucked off to bed.

Nothing on earth would surprise me less than Tremblay getting the mark. He gave me to Bellatrix last year, basically, (but let's not mention that to Theo) so he's pretty fucking dreadful. Also, he's Rosier's cousin and I think Malfoy is fucking him, which puts me right off my lunch.

I hear from sources that Mulciber's heir was marked in the summer and Tom's trying to get his teeth into Travers for his 'continental value' but it's hard to mark European Wixen. Apparently, serf brands were outlawed in 1946 by the Congregation. (Blaise) Ever get the sense we'd all be so much better off if we dismantled the fucking ministry and joined the Congregation?

As for the rest of the list, I don't know. Marina's my mate but she won't sign treaties, she's on our side though, if we have a side. Thanks for the heads up about Draco. Yeah, he's a dick but he literally can't curse me so that's something. Probably wouldn't stop him from throwing some cursed ancient mummy heads from Borgin and Burke's at me though.

By the way, the castle is shit without you. I miss you both a fucking ton.

Also, Fred, sorry for getting fake-engaged to your boyfriend. I'm trying not to be awkward about it but it's really fucking awkward.

Harry (not your lord, idiots)

Milord (definitely our Lord, Harry, you twit)

Harry, mate, don't sweat it about Blaise. I'm not above a little subterfuge to get what I want. (That's his way of saying he fucking loves sneaking around with his boyfriend) George says that like everyone in Diagon Alley doesn't SEE him getting a room over the Leaky with Oliver Wood!

More important matters: Leave Tremblay to us. There are still lots of scores to be settled from the night you were taken. Trust us, we'll deal with Tremblay.

Fucking insane that there are marked students. We knew Moldywarts liked them young, but this takes the biscuit. It does dovetail into something important though - we've been hearing rumblings from Gringotts and the Ministry (Gemma Farley, very useful woman to know it turns out, as is Fleur Delacour) that some of the Ancient Houses are naming heirs outside of the family line. We think this is because people like Bellatrix and Dolohov don't have natural heirs but the Minister is onto our plan now. He wants to sure up the heirs that are on his side. So don't be surprised if a few more heirs make themselves known at Hogwarts. I've told Blaise all this and we'll need to move fast - see if we can suss out where these kids land before Rosier gets his teeth into them. (Like he's got his teeth into Malfoy - ew!) Speaking of Malfoys, seriously Harry, watch your back. We've written to Ron to tell him what's going on and he and Hermione are going to keep an eye on Ferret Face (because you can't have eyes in the back of your head, Harry, it's too much to ask) so perhaps you could give him Padfoot and Moony's gift? That little git has got something

planned up there and you're right, stuff from Borgin and Burke's can be worse than a curse.

You're not the first person to think that we might all be better off under a united Magical Europe. It would definitely be better for our business. The import rates are extortionate.

We fucking miss you too, littlest brother-Lord.

*As Bill says, keep your axe sharp. We hear there might be some press coming out about your 'engagement' this week. **Keep your head above water.***

George Weasley, Heir and Guardsman to the House of Black

Fred Weasley, Guardsman to the House of Black

— — —

“Well,” Harry sighed, looking down at the headline of Witch Weekly as he sits in the Quidditch stands with Ron, Hermione and Blaise. “That didn’t take long.”

It’s taken two weeks but now the front cover of the magazine is a picture of Harry from the Wizengamot, scowling, he imagines, at Rita Skeeter’s smirking face. There’s also a picture of Blaise with his mother, it looks like some kind of official portrait. They both look stunning and deadly. The headline is typical Skeeter and very annoying:

BOY-WHO-LIVED OFF THE MARKET - SON OF TRAITOR AND CONVICT SIRIUS BLACK ENGAGED TO SON OF HEAD OF CONGREGATION - Is this all a ploy to patch up the reputation of a criminal? Full feature piece with Rita Skeeter!

“Off the market, talking about you like you’re a cow, that woman is ridiculous,” Hermione grumbles beside him. “Lucius Malfoy must be pissed off, I thought he was trying to stop this kind of press about you?”

“What kind of press?”

“Press that makes you look awesome and kind of fit,” Ron snorts on the other side of Hermione, grinning at the picture of Harry. “Who’s boots were those? They look like Bill’s.”

“Magnus let me borrow them,” Harry says.

“It’s true that the Minister is angry, but Witch Weekly is not a British publication, it’s an international conglomerate,” Blaise says with his usual cool. “They can publish what they want.”

“That’s sort of hilarious,” Harry snorts. “He can bully the Daily Prophet but not Witch Weekly? They have a section dedicated to the dates of Quidditch players.”

“Oh, I know,” Hermione grumbles, still sore about how she was portrayed when she was going out with Krum.

“Yes, they have a Quidditch gossip section and a vast international readership, who do you think keeps Rita Skeeter in those diamond glasses?” Blaise snorts.

“My mum thinks they’re fake,” Ron mutters.

“Can we talk about this shit instead?” Harry waves the letter from Fred and George in front of them all. He’s not read Skeeter’s article but he knows Theo has and Theo immediately set his copy on fire. That tells Harry everything he needs to know.

“Theo, Daphne and I have discussed this. Rosier is going to be the problem,” Blaise frowns, looking down at the list Fred and George sent.

“Why?” Hermione frowns, putting her hand on Ron’s knee to stop it from jiggling with nervous energy.

“Hey, Potter-Black!” MacLaggen yells from where he’s sat, waving his copy of Witch Weekly in the air. “So you’re not just a fucking Slytherin you’re *fucking* a Slytherin?”

“Fuck you,” Harry calls back languidly. “Except no one will.”

“Nice one,” Ron snorts as MacLaggen scowls at Harry and turns back to his mates. Harry’s not surprised at this reaction to the Witch Weekly article. He’s never received any press that has painted him in a positive light in the eyes of the Hogwarts students. He doesn’t expect it to change now.

“Why is Rosier a problem?” Hermione presses.

“Because he’s a Death Eater,” Harry mutters to Hermione as MacLaggen turns away.

“Yes, I can see that, Harry,” Hermione says tartly. “Why is he a *particular* problem?”

“Because he’s third generation, like Malfoy,” Blaise says. “Felix Rosier the first, his grandfather, was at school with Lord Gaunt and Evan Rosier was with the Dark Lord since before his downfall, they were both killed by Aurors in the last war. He’s the oldest student Death Eater at Hogwarts and he’s going to be the one tasked with bringing any reculant heirs to heel.”

“It doesn’t look like there are many on that list who could swing our way,” Hermione says thoughtfully. “From having Death Eater parents or family, I mean.”

“I wouldn’t ask them to,” Harry says. “Look at Selwyn.”

They all shoot a glance over to a large group of girls sitting in the stands. They’re mainly composed of Gryffindors, Harry recognises Lavender Brown and Romilda Vane, but he also sees Tara Ogden and Little Selwyn sitting there. Beatrice stands up and waves at him madly for a second, one of the older girls pulling her back down. Harry smiles at her and waves back, seeming to elicit a wave of laughter from the girls.

“Don’t, Beatrice!” Romilda Vane yells towards them, flicking open her copy of Witch Weekly. “He prefers *Italian boys* !”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Blaise says and Harry smirks, nudging his shoulder which seems to make Vane angry.

“Get a room!” She yells.

“You get one!” Hermione yells back. “For your jealousy!”

“Don’t bother,” Harry mutters, shaking his head as Vane glares at Hermione.

“Who’d be jealous of Potter-Black?” MacLaggen sneers loudly. “Fucking *dark* arsehole -,”

“Shut your face,” Ron scowls at him.

“Why should I?” MacLaggen calls back, ignoring Ron and fixing his eyes on Harry. “You gonna use a *protego diabolica* on us? We’re so *scared*! ”

All of the people in MacLaggen’s crowd instantly begin hissing in a mockery of Harry’s performance in Defence, and most of the girls watching fall about laughing, except little Selwyn, who frowns and folds her arms.

“Out of interest, are they actually saying anything in parseltongue?” Blaise asks.

“Course not,” Harry snorts. “They’re just a bunch of hissing dicks.”

The rumour of Harry’s shield has run all around the school. Most people are muttering about how it just makes him like his Death Eater Dad, (something Harry thinks is hilarious since Sirius was about as far from a Death Eater as a person could get and Severus, Harry’s living Sire, is an actual *literal* Death Eater) and the Witch Weekly article won’t help anything.

“This whole place is full of dicks,” Ron mutters resentfully. He glances at MacLaggen’s crowd. Seamus is sitting on the edge of it. “Disloyal twats.”

“I understand why the Slytherins resent our shared power and why the Ravenclaws are distrustful of it,” Blaise says, shaking his head and looking down at the Witch Weekly cover. “I do not understand the Gryffindors or the Hufflepuffs reaction to any of this.”

Even before the Witch Weekly article, people have been looking at Harry and Blaise sitting together with particular dislike.

“The Gryffindors loathe me because of Sirius,” Harry mutters.

“But your *other* father was James Potter.”

“They don’t like to remember that.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re nonsensical,” Hermione explodes furiously. Blaise snorts with laughter and grins at her.

“It’s the Puffs that make no sense,” Ron says, shaking his head. “They’ve generally been pretty pro-Harry, aside from the whole thing with the petrifying in second year.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t do that, right?” Blaise says with a wink. Harry isn’t in the mood to explain the whole heir of Slytherin thing. Besides, the Hufflepuffs are the one part of this equation he can understand. At least, theoretically.

“It’s because they’re still loyal to Cedric,” Harry says tautly. He gets it, but he doesn’t want to talk about how fucking awful it makes him feel that so many Hufflepuffs, including ones he’s taught in the D.A. like Justin Finch Fletchley, won’t even look at Harry anymore now that he’s supposedly ‘moved on.’ Only the ones he has treaties with are still talking to him.

“Did they expect you to be single forever because your *amore* died?” Blaise frowns.

“They believe Amos Diggory when he says Harry was using Cedric,” Hermione says sadly.

“Wankers,” Ron mutters.

“They’re using this as an example, saying that Harry must not have cared about Cedric if he traded up so fast.”

“Let’s talk about Death Eaters,” Harry says abruptly, quietly thinking that if the Hufflepuffs really believe that Harry’s traded up in being with Blaise, then they never really knew Cedric at all. “We need to be careful about the Death Eater kids, the ones like Selwyn. We don’t want to make life worse for them.”

“I don’t much care about making life worse for kids who are literally Death Eaters,” Hermione says under her breath and Harry quietly agrees, since at the moment the Slytherin death eater students like Malfoy and Crabbe are the ones meaning that he can’t go to bed until two in the morning when they’re all asleep. He’s really fucking tired.

“Charming,” Blaise says cheerfully.

“What do you want? You want me to be compassionate towards people who call me a mudblood?” Hermione glares at Blaise.

“Of course not,” Blaise smiles back at her. “I want you to consider the political value of being compassionate towards them.”

“We’re not running rehab for bigots,” Hermione says hotly.

“It’s not rehabilitation, it’s re-education.”

“It’s fucking bonkers,” Ron mutters, looking very green as the Seeker trials come to a close.

“It’s irrelevant, we’re not trying to do that, we’re just trying to bloody survive,” Harry rubs his scar and wishes that Theo and Daphne were with them. They’re both good at balancing

the combination of Hermione and Blaise which usually gives him a headache. But Theo is with Severus all day, working as his assistant and Daphne says Quidditch tryouts interest her 'not a whit.'

"No, we're not, my lord," Blaise says quietly. "It's very important you understand this. We have publicly bound our families together and the House of Zabini does not just survive anything."

"You thrive?" Hermione says sarcastically.

"Precisely," Blaise says, without a hint of irony.

"He's right, mate," Ron says abruptly. He pulls his gaze away from the chaser tryouts and his brown eyes find Harry's. "We won't win with a strategy of survival. We've got to go on the offence at some point."

"You wanna do that now?" Harry says sarcastically. "With most people not believing Voldemort is back or really a threat and thinking I'm the crazy son of a convict and some kind of next Dark Lord in the making?"

"Look, an offensive strategy isn't necessarily an aggressive strategy," Ron says sagely. "No one's saying you run around going 'hey! Voldeyshorts! I'm actively trying to fuck you up!' But an offensive strategy takes the fight forward. A survivalist strategy is a retreat."

Blaise stares at Ron with a slow grin.

"Two things," he says, holding up his fingers. "One, Voldeyshorts is an *excellent* moniker for Lord Gaunt, secondly, you have a strong grasp of strategy."

"Um, thanks," Ron mumbles, blushing deeply. "I play a lot of chess."

"Really? Have you played Theodore?"

"Nott can shove it," Ron mutters. "The point is, we want to win, right? We want to be ready?"

As he speaks, he looks at Harry significantly. Harry knows he's thinking about Dumbledore's death when it comes. Harry nods.

"Then we need to have a strategy for that," Ron taps the paper. "Yeah, this school is full of utter pricks, but not everyone hates you, I mean, little Selwyn likes you. So ... I dunno, meet the fucking heirs."

"Ron's right," Hermione says sagely. "Not everyone hates you."

"I don't," Blaise grins. "There's a whole Witch Weekly article about it."

"Fine," Harry rolls his eyes, exhausted by the whole idea. "We're doing Wildsmith today?"

“She’ll be here soon,” Blaise says, running his finger down the list. “Ogden, Kettleburn, Brocklehurst and Patil, they all seem like ones Granger can handle?”

“Is that because they’re girls?” Hermione says sarcastically.

“It’s because they are all Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff heirs from traditionally Light families who likely will likely want to swear to the House of Potter and do not trust me because I am a Slytherin and I represent the European interest in British politics, and that was before Skeeter wrote her article,” Blaise says softly. “Last year, Fred handled these but that was before there was an Heir to the House of Potter. I would appreciate your help.”

“Oh,” Hermione stares at him and Ron elbows her in the ribs. Harry knows that Blaise misses Fred a lot and feels a pang for the stick Blaise is going to get now everyone in the world knows he’s engaged to Harry.

“We’ll help,” Ron says gruffly. “I’m no good with Patil, but I know Brocklehurst. She’s Ginny’s friend.”

“I thought you went to the Yule Ball with Patil,” Blaise says.

“That’s why I’m no good with her,” Ron says flatly.

“Her sister’s a Gryffindor, correct?” Blaise asks.

“Yeah, you don’t want to go that route,” Harry shakes his head. “Parvati is not a fan of mine.”

“What did you both *do* at the Yule ball?” Blaise grins.

“I know Padma,” Hermione says. “She’s nice but she won’t do anything without her Dad’s consent. But Tara Ogden, Harry, she’ll take a treaty as soon as you offer it. She loved you at the Wizengamot. Let’s focus on easy wins.”

“And present threats,” Blaise says. He taps his fingers against a particular name. “The Carrows.”

“You know them?” Harry asks. Blaise shakes his head.

“You know the story about their Aunt and Uncle? Alecto and Amycus?” Blaise asks. “The Death Eaters?”

Hermione and Harry shake their heads but Ron answers.

“Incest,” Ron grunts.

“Ew,” Harry winces.

“Excuse me?” Hermione splutters.

“They’re shagging, Hermione, how else do you want me to say it?” Ron snaps.

"I don't want you to say it all!" Hermione exclaims.

"It's an ugly reputation," Blaise says. "No doubt the younger twins have struggled for it, but I have no idea of their allegiances."

"They're coming to the dinner tonight," Hermione says. "The Slug Club dinner."

"Gross," Ron mutters.

"Exactly," Harry says. Both Hermione and Blaise glare at him.

"You should come," Hermione says.

"If for no other reason then Professor Slughorn will stop asking me about you," Blaise says drily.

"Nope," Harry shakes his head. "Don't like him, don't trust him, won't do it."

"Theo's coming," Blaise says lightly. "After he's finished with Professor Snape."

"That's even less reason to go," Harry mumbles. "He doesn't want to stare at you holding my hand all night."

"I could hold it under the table."

"You could fuck off."

"You won't be rid of me that easily, my Lord."

"Don't call me that!"

"I'll call you what I like, *amore*," Blaise smirks.

"You're such a prick -,"

"So you keep saying," Blaise taps his finger against the letter where Fred and George mentioned other houses claiming heirs. "I've heard rumours about Yaxley and the Rowle seat."

"Heard what?" Hermione asks. Before Blaise can answer Ginny and Dean fly over, having finished Seeker and Chaser tryouts. Ron stands up on shaky legs as Katie calls for the keepers.

"You going out for keeper this year, Weasley?" McLaggan yells. "Thought I'd give it a shot. You see, the Slytherins don't make badges about me sucking, because I don't."

"I dunno, Hermione, you reckon you could make a badge about how much of an idiot McLaggan is?" Ginny says loudly.

"Yeah, maybe about how he's a bullying dick with no friends?" Harry adds with a scowl.

“That would be a lot of text on a badge,” Hermione says.

“Maybe a banner would be sufficient,” Blaise says.

“I’ll draw you a good banner, Hermione,” Dean says, clapping Ron on the shoulder. “You’ve got this, mate.”

Ron nods and takes the firebolt from Ginny. He looks at Harry, who smiles reassuringly.

“Deep breaths,” Harry says quietly, and Ron breathes in slowly through his nose and out through his mouth, just like Harry taught him. “You’re twice the keeper he is. Trust your instincts.”

“Come on, Weasley, scared of a little competition?” MacLaggen yells. “Worried you won’t be *the king* anymore?”

“I’m the king of fucking hating you, twat,” Ron mutters, mounting the firebolt and flying over to the goalposts, MacLaggen flying to the opposite end.

“Good luck, Ron!” Lavender Brown yells. All the girls around her fall about giggling. Ginny glares at her.

“Luna should be here,” she grumbles.

“Luna wouldn’t notice,” Harry snorts, shaking his head. Jealousy and envy are feelings that Luna is entirely beyond and Ron doesn’t even look at Lavender, just turning his head back to wave at Harry, who waves back.

“Merlin, why does *everyone* fancy Potter-Black?” Lavender moans loudly. Harry ignores her but Blaise snorts with laughter beside him.

“Because they haven’t got to know you, I’d presume,” Blaise quips under his breath.

“Piss off,” Harry mutters, surreptitiously shooting a little bit of the Slytherin magic into Blaise’s thigh who jumps and grins.

“Exactly,” Blaise chuckles.

“MacLaggen’s got a fast sweep,” Dean says, watching as Demelza lines up in front of the goal posts to take her shot with the quaffle.

“It’s his mouth, not his broom that’s the problem,” Ginny says darkly.

“Maybe I should just confound him,” Hermione glares at MacLaggen’s back.

“Ron’s got this,” Harry says confidently.

“It might still be fun,” Hermione says under her breath.

“Granger, your vindictiveness is very attractive, I hope you know that,” Blaise grins.

“Talk to me about Yaxley and Rowle,” Harry says, keeping his eye on the other trial chasers as they line up to take shots at MacLaggen’s goal.

“The Death Eaters?” Ginny asks.

“Yeah,” Harry nods. Dean frowns next to her but looks interested.

“It is nothing concrete, but one hears whispers,” Blaise muses. “Yaxley is connected to your family through the Blacks -,”

“Everyone’s connected through the Blacks,” Ginny mutters.

“- but also through the Lestranges and whilst Tremblay is the next logical heir there -,”

“Fitz,” Harry blurts out, staring at Blaise. “Yaxley’s thinking about making Fitz his heir?”

“It’s a rumour,” Blaise shrugs. “But maybe.”

“Fitz has a no wands treaty with me,” Harry swallows hard. He likes Fitz a lot. He loves Sahara and is very funny and only twelve. Harry’s seen Yaxley fight. He doesn’t want Fitz to be on the end of that. “Can he refuse the heirship?”

“He ... could,” Blaise says slowly. “It would be unusual.”

“Yeah but a twelve year old Slytherin telling a fucking *Death Eater*, ‘oh shit, sorry, I’ve got a no wands treaty with Harry fucking Potter’ might be worse than unusual,” Harry snaps.

“Well, you could always give him your snake,” Blaise says lightly.

“You’re such a prat.”

“You only say that because you’re spending so much time with me,” Blaise smiles in a way that Harry finds very annoying. “I’m delightful in small doses.”

“Then I need much smaller doses, you wanker.”

“You two are really engaged?” Dean interrupts and gives Harry a sharp look. “Really? Or is Witch Weekly making up shit about you again? Like the thing it published about Hermione in fourth year?”

“No, it’s right,” Harry grumbles. “For once.”

“*Tomba, amore mio*,” Blaise offers Harry his hand and Harry takes it, reluctantly, understanding the meagre Italian. *Vault, my love*. He’d forgotten that Dean and Ginny aren’t part of what Ron and Blaise have taken to calling ‘the vault.’

“Harry likes his jokes,” Blaise goes on. “He’s hilarious but yes, we are promised.”

“You don’t seem excited,” Ginny’s eyes are narrowed.

“Harry prefers privacy,” Blaise says.

“Not a lot of that around here,” Harry grumbles. Ginny and Dean exchange a look.

“How did you meet?” Ginny asks shrewdly. “The article is pretty thin on details.”

“Yeah, it’s mainly about your Mum -” Dean gives Blaise a look.

“Complimentary?” Blaise smiles.

“Very,” Ginny says.

“- and Harry’s Dad,” Dean goes on.

“Skeeter’s never given me a compliment in her life, I doubt she’d give them to Sirius,” Harry mutters.

“She thinks it’s a ruse,” Ginny says. “Like, your steward organised it to make your reputation better.”

“Wow, she’s going to regret taking on Magnus,” Harry says with a grim smile. If one good thing to come out of this article is that Skeeter gets taken down by Magnus, Harry will be happy.

“Be assured, the affection between us is genuine,” Blaise says, squeezing Harry’s hand. He forces himself not to roll his eyes.

“Very convincing,” Ginny says drolly. She raises an eyebrow at Harry. “How did it start, then?”

“Well ... his Mum invited me to his house for tea last Yule,” Harry says, deciding to stick as closely to the truth as possible.

“And you fancied him then?” Dean prompts, sceptically.

“Am I not fanciable?” Blaise asks lightly.

“Did you?” Ginny presses Harry, ignoring Blaise. Harry can feel that Hermione is very tense next to him. Harry had sort of forgotten that it’s only with certain people that he can treat Blaise like he’s the most annoying person on the planet. Harry’s status as ‘weird’ and ‘dangerous’ and the son of Sirius Black isn’t exactly making him tons of friends, he’s mostly spending all of his time hanging out with people in the vault so he hasn’t had to deal with this yet - lying to friends who might ask awkward questions.

“No, I thought he was a dick,” Harry said flatly and Blaise snorts and grins at him.

“You called me so, remember, *amore?*”

“Yeah, not that you could tell, it was in parseltongue,” Harry can’t help but grin back.

“Can’t hide tone, Harry.”

“Fucking can.”

“So when did it change?” Ginny asks, her eyes watching Harry closely.

“We ... courted,” Harry feels like his mouth is dry. He tries to think of it purely in terms of his friendship with Blaise. When did Blaise stop being just Theo’s friend and start being his too? “It just ... developed. Then we stayed in Rome together in the summer.”

“We played a lot of football for my rehab,” Blaise says with a flicker of a wink. Harry shoots him a grudging smile, thinking of what Ginny would say if she knew that for a large portion of their football matches, Blaise was drooling over Bill.

“Football? Really?” Dean leans forward. “You’re Italian, right? Who do you support?”

“Milan, who else?” Blaise scoffs and Dean grins.

“Yeah, they were great in ’94 ...” Dean begins and Harry sees Ginny relax, distracted for a moment as Blaise and Dean begin to chat football.

“Do you know anything about the Rowle seat?” Hermione says to Harry, and he’s relieved to be distracted again.

“No.”

“There’s a fourth year Slytherin, Hilary Lee,” Blaise says, rejoining the conversation. “She’s ... distantly connected.”

“Her parents?”

“Both dead.”

“Shit,” Harry closes his eyes. He knows from experience how vulnerable being an orphan makes a wixen child. “Okay. Who looks after her?”

“That’s the point,” Blaise frowns. “I think she has a muggle Aunt and Uncle who raised her but ... well, there are rumblings of a change in policy around muggleborn and muggle-raised children.”

“What kind of change?” Hermione’s voice is sharp.

“That the Ministry of Magic will move more towards the policy the Americans have,” Blaise says. “Removing muggleborn children from their parents at birth.”

“What?” Dean is outraged. Harry notices Hermione’s hands trembling next to him and takes hold of one, squeezing it softly.

“It’s unlikely the legislation would ascend that quickly,” Blaise says in a reassuring voice. “But a natural step would be to allow wixen children who can be claimed through the bloodline of noble and Ancient houses to be removed from muggle guardians.”

“So that will target half-bloods,” Dean says softly. “Like Seamus.”

“Yes,” Hermione’s voice is shaking. “Half-bloods can be saved, after all. Voldemort doesn’t *want* muggleborns at all. He wants to eradicate us, to make us illegal. Doesn’t he?”

“It does look like the policies will lean that way, yes,” Blaise says quietly, looking at Hermione with tremendous regret.

“How do you know all this?” Dean demands.

Blaise glances at him and smiles.

“You are undoubtedly beautiful, Thomas, but I’m not entirely sure of your loyalties so I’ll keep my secrets to myself.”

“Dean is with us,” Ginny says sharply, holding his hand.

“I’m not entirely sure of *your* loyalties,” Blaise says sweetly. “Your Lord might be Harry’s *Anzar* but you’ve sworn no vow or treaty, nor has Thomas.”

“Harry’s my brother,” Ginny says staunchly.

“I thought he was Granger’s brother,” Blaise shoots a look at Hermione.

“He was mine *first!*” Ginny says hotly. “Everyone knows Harry’s an adopted Weasley.”

“Do you just collect sisters?” Blaise asks.

“Something like that,” Harry sighs. “Look, Ginny’s in. The Blacks and the Weasleys are related anyway.”

“You’re related to everyone,” Blaise says.

“Yeah, but I actually *care* about being related to them,” Harry rolls his eyes because it’s not true, he’s not related to everyone, not by the blood that wixen society thinks matters so much. *I’m not a Black by blood. I’m the son of a half-blood and a muggleblorn.* “And Dean’s a good mate.”

“A good mate whose best friend hates you?” Blaise raises his eyebrows.

“Seamus has got his own thing going on,” Dean says shortly to Blaise. “Look, I’ll swear a treaty if you need me to.”

“You will?” Hermione stares at him. “Why?”

“Because I don’t have a House and I’m muggleborn,” Dean shrugs. “Seems smart, especially if the Ministry’s going to start treating muggleborn children like they’re second class citizens.”

“What will you swear?” Blaise asks, eyes gleaming.

“Bear wands,” Dean shrugs. “Like Lee did, last year.”

“And your allegiance won’t shift if this alters?” Blaise asks, gesturing at Dean and Ginny’s held hands. Dean’s face darkens.

“Harry’s been my mate since first year,” he glares at Blaise. “So I reckon not, and I don’t see how it’s your business anyway.”

“And who says anything is fucking altering?” Ginny demands.

“His business is my business. Speaking of,” Blaise stands up and nods towards a dark-haired girl with braids climbing into the stands. “That’s Wildsmith. Come on.”

“Be right back,” Harry moans, slouching to his feet. “Gotta go do some politics.”

“We shouldn’t have called it Dumbledore’s Army,” Harry hears Dean say behind him as he follows Blaise down the stairs. “Potter’s army is more like.”

“I prefer *Cortem Black et Zabini*, ” Blaise chuckles back at them.

“Just because you say things in Latin doesn’t make you subtle - Harry is *not* building a Court!” Hermione says angrily. “We are not in the 15th Century!”

“Doesn’t sound right,” Ginny says. “The Army of the House of Black sounds better.”

“Not an army!” Harry calls over his shoulder and then turns quietly to Blaise to ask: “What’s a court?”

“Ask Theodore,” Blaise smirks. “But essentially, a Magical Court is a group of wixen that support, fight for, honour and serve a central figure or figures: Usually, a Lord and his or her Consort.”

“I’m not a Lord,” Harry mutters. He wants to deny that he doesn’t have a consort but he has a consort shield so it’s ridiculous to try. “I might be your Lord, fine, we have a vow but, like, I’m not a Lord, I don’t have a Court -,”

“Harry,” Blaise stops on the step a few steps below him and gives Harry a stern look. “You’re going to have to get used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“These treaties are being sworn for a reason, my Lord,” Blaise’s eyes are sharp as he emphasizes the word. Harry can feel the weight of their bond between his shoulder blades. “You need to get used to the idea that one day, these people *will* bear wands for you.”

“If we’re doing anything right, they’ll bear wands for themselves,” Harry says shortly.

“Undoubtedly, but a bear wand treaty is only active when it is called upon. The time is coming when you’re going to have to call in your treaties and you need to be ready to do that.”

“Ready for people to fight and maybe die on my word, you mean?” Harry snaps. “Kids my age, maybe younger than me?”

“What happened to not being able to win on your own?” Blaise raises his eyebrows, quoting their first discussion about all this at the Giardino. “What happened to not giving out free passes to get out of a war you are forced to fight?”

“Maybe I learned exactly how it feels when someone who matters takes a curse for me,” Harry glares at Blaise. Inside his mind, he sees Sirius fall through the veil. Blaise looks at him with compassion, but Harry knows what that redness in Blaise’s eyes means. Harry stuffs his hands into his trousers and watches Katie line up to take a shot at Ron. He saves it beautifully.

“YEAH!” Harry bellows, clapping loudly as Ginny, Dean and Hermione whoop and clap behind him. “Fucking GO, Ron!”

“You have always been refreshingly clear about the notion that war is likely inevitable,” Blaise says.

“Yeah because it is for me,” Harry smiles and waves at Ron who does a celebratory loop on his firebolt.

“These people are sworn to you, it is inevitable for them too,” Blaise says. Harry sighs and looks at little Selwyn, clapping for Ron. He doesn’t know how he feels about a little girl who has sacrificed the good opinion of her parents to stand with Harry putting herself in the line of fire for him. *Maybe dying like Sirius*. Harry suddenly really wishes that Theo was here. Theo would understand. He sighs and looks at Blaise for a second, trying to press his own weariness back through his shield bond, to tell Blaise how tired he is of fighting. Blaise’s eyebrows shoot up and his eyes are suddenly blood red.

“My Lord,” Blaise whispers. He steps back up so he is on the step below Harry and takes hold of Harry’s hand. The girls watching them all scream with laughter and wolf whistles but they don’t realise what’s happening. Blaise is holding Harry’s right hand with his left, just as they held hands and wrists when they swore the consort shield vow, when Blaise swore to put his life on the line for Theo, for Harry’s consort. Then he did it, at the end of last year, and Harry couldn’t be more grateful. He can’t hear any words through Blaise’s bond but he can feel the strength of it, the commitment. Blaise doesn’t have to say anything, Harry knows what it means. *I’m not alone*.

“You’re going to have to get used to it,” Blaise repeats softly.

“I know,” Harry swallows and squeezes Blaise’s hand in silent gratitude for everything he has vowed and everything he does for Harry and Theo. “Thanks.”

Blaise smiles fondly.

“Shall we?” Blaise indicates heir Wildsmith who has sat down and is watching the tryouts. Harry sighs and wonders briefly how he got here, chatting politics with Slytherins rather than scoring goals with Gryffindors. *No going back*. Harry nods. As they walk down the steps, a

fiery feather appears out of mid-air, a note floating in front of his face. Harry groans heavily. He is so over super-powerful people sending him random shit in the mail.

“It’s not Lord Gaunt, is it?” Blaise asks, pausing on the steps, frowning deeply.

“No, it’s the other one,” Harry says as he reads the note.

Harry, I hope your first two weeks of school have been successful. If you are free to come to my office tonight at 7:30 pm, I enjoy acid pops. Professor Dumbledore.

“Now I really can’t come to the party,” Harry grins, passing it to Blaise who reads it quickly. “You’ll have to deal with the Carrows on your own.”

“You have a meeting with the Headmaster? Alone?” Blaise clicks his teeth. “Is that wise?”

“I won’t be alone, I’ll take Sahara,” Harry says, and instantly feels the weight of her invisible form settle around his shoulders. He grins happily. He’s missed having her with him all the time, but her voice is never far away.

You are never alone, Greenheart.

“You’re taking your familiar to your meeting with the headmaster?” Blaise raises an eyebrow. “Your deadly familiar?”

“Yeah, well, Dumbledore always brings his,” Harry shrugs.

“Phoenixes are not deadly.”

“So what? And she’s not *my* familiar, we have a timeshare.”

“Of course, forgive me, I forgot the ridiculous excuse you both peddle,” Blaise mutters, rolling his eyes. “Come on, Head Girl Wildsmith awaits.”

“Okay,” Harry sighs stuffs the note in his pocket. He wonders if Dumbledore’s heard about the *protego diabolica* and winces.

“*You should not fear him,*” Sahara hisses around his neck. “*You are becoming yourself.*”

“*I don’t fear him,*” Harry hisses back.

“*Then why do you smell like fear?*”

Harry rolls his eyes. He doesn’t know the answer but all this talk of heirs and alliances has made the hair on the back of his neck tingle. He has the sensation of someone walking beside him, unseen. He knows, oddly, that if he turns his head, he’ll see Death’s face.

War is coming, Master, Death whispers inside his mind. *We are coming.*

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: @elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website: emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Potions and Pensieve

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, lessons in the dungeons and in Dumbledore's office.
Next time, Harry goes to a dinner party.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What steps of the death-cap draught are most precarious?” Snape asks.

“Step thirteen and fourteen, adding the death caps and achieving the right colour,” Theo responds quickly, carefully slicing the aforementioned death cap mushrooms away from their stalks. Across the table, Snape is checking the temperature of the cough draught they just finished. The death cap draught is at step twelve, and the cauldron on his right hand side is simmering softly at a pale creamy colour. Snape nods.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because the death caps are volatile.”

“Again, why?”

Theo pauses. No person or textbook has ever asked him why something he considers to be a fact is a fact. Snape eyes him for a second and then nods at the mushrooms.

“Consider the fungi,” he says quietly. “Then formulate your answer.”

Theo stares at the mushrooms under his fingers and examines them slowly. He has learned everything he thinks he could need to know from books and his own practice, but in these last two Sundays, he has learned more from Professor Snape than he ever expected to. He had expected to be paying his dues, to be scrubbing cauldrons and brewing basic potions and he has been, in the last eight hours Theo has brewed more potions than he has all summer long, but he is also being asked questions he has never considered. Professor Snape continuously presses the limits of his knowledge, of what is written on the page of his textbooks and this is how he does it.

“The toxins,” Theo says slowly.

“More.” Theo turns the mushrooms in his hands. It is unusual for him, to imagine the library in his mind and see that there is nothing on the page that can help him. Instead, the answers are under his hands, in the ingredients he touches.

“The size,” Theo says. “No mushrooms are perfectly sized and different sized mushrooms have different levels of toxicity.”

Snape nods.

“Fungi are live ingredients,” Snape slowly measures the cough draught into beakers that Theo painstakingly labelled earlier. “Their toxicity can be varied depending on where they have grown. The soil they were bred in. The air they breathed. Especially in a magical forest. What is the rule for working with live ingredients?”

“Know what it ate,” Theo doesn’t know if it is Snape’s rule, but it was always his mother’s and it falls out of his mouth before he can stop it. Snape pauses and looks up at him.

“Or, in other terms, consider its consumption,” Snape nods at him in what might be an approving manner. “What do you know of these death caps? Of their consumption?”

“Nothing,” Theo says honestly.

“Specificity, Mr Nott.”

”I know nothing specifically about where these death caps grew,” Theo corrects himself.

“Then what do you know of death caps in general?”

“I know that death caps like the roots of trees in deciduous woods in large groups spaced apart. They prefer beech and oak trees. They produce fruiting bodies in fairy circles.”

“Those are fae death caps, Mr Nott,” Snape says. Theo pauses. He had never considered that the fruiting bodies that muggles call fairy circles could actually be a magical occurrence, but of course they could be.

“But because fae are considered extinct ...” Theo says slowly. “Most wixen do not know that.”

“Most wixen are not potioners,” Snape says sharply. “Tell me how, considering the variables presented by the toxin, we can ensure the success of the brew?”

“Add them slowly,” Theo gives the textbook answer. “And watch for colour.”

“What precipitates the change in colour?”

The obvious answer is the mushroom, but Theo knows that will only get him a glare. Theo thinks through the recipe. Step thirteen is precarious because adding mushrooms too quickly can result in a change to the wrong colour (usually a deep muddy brown instead of the wanted wicked black) indicating the brew will be ruined. They must be added in careful

stages and the instructions in all the textbooks only tell him to watch for colour. It does not tell him why the colour changes. *Consider its consumption.*

“If the environment changes the toxin level then the toxin level could be the reason behind the change of colour,” he says slowly. “If I suspect a mushroom is of higher toxicity, I would need to add smaller amounts than recommended so it does not become so toxic that it corrupts the other ingredients”

“How do you suspect a higher toxicity?”

“I ... do not know,” Theo confesses. Snape looks at him for a long moment and then reaches over with a pipette, taking a tiny drop from Theo’s cauldron and dropping it onto one mushroom. The drop of potion turns grey. He then drops it on another mushroom and it turns black. Theo stares. He has never seen anything like this mentioned in any potion book or journal or research paper he has ever read, which can only mean one thing. It is either a secret passed from potioners to their apprentices, or it is something Snape has discovered himself.

“Darker is higher toxicity,” Theo breathes, “just like the potion colour.”

Snape nods.

“The beginning of this potion is how poison litmus paper is made,” he says. “When creating the death-cap draught, always add the most potent mushroom first, in the smallest doses possible.”

“The recipe calls for quarter slices.”

Snape picks up the mushroom with the black mark.

“Do you know how much of this fungi is sufficient for the recipe?” he demands.

“No,” Theo stares at it. “But as long as it turns the right colour -,”

“No,” Snape cuts him off. “The window of toxicity that precipitates the black colour begins at 70% and ruins after 80%. What is the perfect toxicity recommended for this draught?”

“Seventy,” Theo says. “But it is still functional within the window.”

“It is still functional for the purpose of being a deadly poison,” Snape corrects him sharply. “What are the other uses of death cap draught?”

Theo blinks. *There are others?* Snape turns the mushroom in his fingers slowly.

“Is this fungi inherently poisonous?”

“Not to some animals,” Theo breathes. “It - it has another use for animals?”

Snape nods and hands the mushroom back to him.

“Dragons,” he says simply. “A *perfectly* prepared death cap draught with a 70 to 72% toxicity can be a sedative for them. Dragon tamers and conservationists will pay handsomely for it, but a potion with too much toxin will only make them sick. A competent potioneer knows how to bring the potion *up* to colour, not fling ingredients into a brew and hope for the right shade.”

“Smaller slices,” Theo nods. “Methodically added until the right shade is reached. The first turn of black will be the closest to 70% toxicity.”

Snape nods. Theo wants to ask how much money Harry’s sire has made selling potions to dragon keepers but returns to carefully slicing the most venomous death cap. Then, he adds it, minuscule slice by minuscule slice, watching as the potion darkens in slow shades of grey until the potion is black as night. Snape looks it over and nods.

“Adequate,” he says, turning off Theo’s burner and setting the temperature gauge in the mix before glancing at the clock. “You have an appointment, Mr Nott.”

Theo notices the time. It is seven o’clock. He is due at Professor Slughorn’s quarters.

“Yes, sir,” Theo nods.

“What will you do better?” Snape asks, and Theo has come to realise this is the question he will end each of their Sundays with.

“I will consider that brews have uses in multiple directions and I will learn where my ingredients come from,” Theo says.

“At the end of the month you will come with me when I gather in the forest,” Snape says with a nod. “Then you will learn.”

“Yes, sir.” Theo knows this is something Chambers did last year, but he thinks it took nearly half a year for Chambers to get his first invitation. He tries not to feel too proud.

“Wash your hands, Mr Nott,” Snape says, turning back to his brew.

“Yes, sir.”

Theo takes some empty beakers to the sink and washes them up before carefully scrubbing his hands with the tar soap that Snape makes himself for these purposes. Even after only two Sundays of using it, Theo’s hands are starting to chap.

“Here,” Snape pulls something from his pocket and hands it to Theo. He unwraps a piece of paper from around a small, yellow lump of what feels like resin and smells like honey. “Beeswax balm. There is enough there to last you until you have used the recipe to brew and set your own.”

Theo looks down at the small, scrawled recipe and nods. It will be easy enough to make.

“Thank you, sir.”

Snape nods but his black eyes are fixed attentively on a different brew. It's a strange moment, but in the way his fingers tap the table, Theo sees Harry's fingers. Snape notices that he's staring and gives Theo a considering glance.

"Your mind shield," he says quietly. "It is adequate?"

"Yes," Theo wonders why he is asking. Snape nods.

"Utilise it at dinner," Snape gestures to the door. "Now go."

Theo quietly leaves the laboratory, rubbing the resin over his hands as he makes his way towards Ravenclaw tower.

"Sorry I'm late, sir," Theo says, entering the dining room that Slughorn keeps for his personal use, just along the corridor from the Ravenclaw dormitories.

"My prodigy! Not to worry, not to worry," Professor Slughorn chortles, waving his wand and an empty chair is pulled back. "We have only just begun the first course."

The table is round. Theo has noticed already how some chairs are more comfortable and more ornate than others. Blaise's is practically a throne. Theo nods at the assembled group and sits down beside Blaise, the Carrow twins on his right. On Blaise's left is Daphne and then Smith. Granger looks dreadfully unhappy to be seated between him and MacLaggen, and Slughorn has placed Draco next to him, on Slughorn's own right hand. Ginny Weasley sits on his left, next to Longbottom, and then poor Shafiq is sandwiched between the two Carrow twins. Theo picks up his soup spoon and shoots a look at the Carrow next to him. He thinks it's Hestia, but he cannot be entirely sure. They deliberately dress to be as identical as possible.

"Now, Mr MacLaggen here was just telling us about hunting nogtails in Norfolk," Slughorn says, winking at Theo. "I'm sure you'd know all about that, Mr Nott. Apollonius did always love to hunt."

Theo had been surprised that Slughorn was even prepared to acknowledge his personal relationship with Apollonius, but he imagines that Apollonius happily being dead and Theo moving towards neutrality has turned his father from a Death Eater Slughorn tried to forget to a beloved old friend whose son he owes equal guidance. *Being fucking excellent at Potions doesn't hurt either.* Harry's derisive comment from last night in bed pops into Theo's head and he tries not to smirk.

"That is true, Professor," Theo says.

"What did Lord Nott hunt?" MacLaggen asks.

"Aside from muggles," Ginny Weasley mutters under her breath. Everyone pretends they cannot hear her.

"Big game," Theo says neutrally. *And me.*

“Yeah, but what’s big?” MacLaggen presses, glaring at Nott.

“All manner of things,” Theo says.

“Come now, my prodigy, do not be modest,” Slughorn chuckles. “I remember when Apollonius told me a tale of taking you hunting for a nundu!”

“A nundu?” Shafiq stares at him. “That would take at least a hundred wizards to subdue.”

Or one, terrified and desperate son who has been told he must slay the beast or be eaten by it, Theo thinks. Apollonius had kept the poor creature starving and wounded so it was less of a threat but after three days hunting each other in the woods around Nott Castle, Theo believes in his heart that the poor beast allowed itself to be slain by his hand rather than endure any longer. Theo does not regret killing Lestranger or the man Apollonius made him slay before he came to Hogwarts, but he will remember the exhausted eyes of the nundu forever.

“An exaggeration,” Theo says with a neutral smile. “Pumas, mountain lions, other big game.”

“Modesty, modesty!” Slughorn laughs, wagging his finger at Theo. “He told me he’d found a Quintaped on that little island of yours!”

Theo smiles tightly but says nothing. The Quintaped was nothing more than a rumour and at nine years old, Theo prayed to every God his mother had ever told him stories about that the Quintaped wouldn’t be found and it wasn’t. Theo’s relief was short-lived, however, because the next week Apollonius bought wolves. He focuses on the starter and listens to Draco drone on about his father’s Ministerial duties. Slughorn is the only one who seems truly interested. Instead, Theo finds his mind drifting to Harry, who is at this moment, meeting with Professor Dumbledore. He finds himself wishing, more than anything, that Harry was with them, even if it would be horrible to watch Slughorn coo and fuss over Harry and Blaise. He finds himself catching Professor Slughorn’s eye and for a second, Theo feels a tingling inside his head, like the start of a headache and, without thinking, erects his fiery mind shield. *By Odin, I bring flame.* He sees Slughorn raise his eyebrows before settling his eyes back on Draco. Theo takes a bite of his starter and dazedly wonders: *did Professor Slughorn just use the legilimency charm on me?* It seems Snape’s warning was not for nothing. He coughs slightly and leans towards Blaise.

“How sharp is your knife?” he questions lightly. “I fear this is blunt.”

Blaise looks puzzled for a millisecond and then grim comprehension floods his eyes, which he covers with a languid smile.

“My knives are always sharp,” Blaise says, conversationally. Theo knows he’s understood. *Be watchful.* For what, Theo isn’t sure, but he knows they’re about to find out.

Harry watches Morfin Gaunt scream at Tara Ogden's great great grandfather. His eyes fix on Marvolo Gaunt, the man who is Tom's great grandfather, he must be. He sees the Peverell/Slytherin ring on his finger, the giant, ugly locket choking Merope Gaunt, hears the parseltongue on their lips and stares at the family he has accidentally become Heir to. He sees no evidence of the Slytherin magic, of its sparkling, dancing joy or the soft grey furls of Peverell magic but wonders if that's just because it's in Bob Ogden's memory. He watches Voldemort's mother pine for Tom Riddle. He watches Dumbledore meet ten-year-old Tom in the orphanage. He sees the bars on the windows and feels a squeezing in his stomach that tries to steal his breath. When he stumbles out of the pensieve and into the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk, he can't help hissing to Sahara as she winds herself back up his leg.

"The Slytherin magic wasn't there," Harry hisses absently. *"Where was it then?"*

"Magic is everywhere, Greenheart," she hisses back. *"It is drawn to you."*

"Helpful. So fucking helpful."

"Harry?" Dumbledore looks at him carefully as he seats himself behind the desk. "To whom are you speaking?"

Harry doesn't say anything but Fawkes emits a little trilling sound and Dumbledore looks at him in surprise.

"Ah," he says softly, his blue eyes uncannily fixing on Harry's lap, where Sahara has curled. "Fawkes tells me you have gained ... a friend."

Harry sighs. He looks down at Sahara.

"Come on," Harry hisses softly. *"Show off."*

She flickers into visibility, stretching herself up with her lurid, beautiful green scales sparkling, almost preening under Fawkes' curious gaze. Dumbledore raises his eyebrows.

"A snake familiar," Dumbledore says softly. Harry can almost see the cogs turning in his old mentor's mind: *Like Voldemort.*

"Sahara's not like Nagini," Harry says quietly, letting her wrap herself around his arm. "She's just a normal boomslang."

It's a lie, Harry can hear Severus' voice, awed and frustrated in his ear: *you created your own familiar!* Harry doesn't care and he reckons Severus would want him to lie right now.

"Even a normal boomslang is still a deadly boomslang, Harry," Dumbledore says softly.

"Did you know when you first met him?" Harry asks, deciding to steer the conversation away from Sahara. If Dumbledore says he can't have Sahara in school, he will just pack up and leave.

“Did I know I had just met the darkest wizard of all time?” Dumbledore sighs heavily. “No, I had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is. However, I was certainly intrigued by him.”

I fucking bet you were, Harry thinks darkly.

“I returned to Hogwarts, intending to keep an eye upon him, something I should have done in any case, given that he was alone and friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others’ sake as much as his.”

“Not that,” Harry says, though his mind sticks like a burr on the words *for others’ sake as much as his*. He’s reminded of the long, lonely summer last year. How much of that was for others’ sake, rather than Harry’s? “Did you know that he was being abused there?”

Dumbledore hesitates.

“I knew that it was an unpleasant life there,” he says quietly. “That much was evident.”

“They had bars on their windows,” Harry stares at Sahara’s scales and tries to bury his anger. “They only put bars on when they want to keep you in. When they know it’s bad enough that you’ll want to run away.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice is unbearably soft and patient. “He was using his powers consciously and, most ominously of all, was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control. The stories of the rabbit and the children in the cave, the fact that he could make people hurt when he wanted to hurt them -,”

“Do you really believe that a kid wakes up one morning and says, you know what? I’m going to hurt people for shits and giggles?” Harry interrupts. His heart is pounding fast. “Don’t you ever think that maybe a kid hurts people because people have hurt him? Because he needs to survive?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice keeps getting softer. “We are not speaking of you.”

“But we kind of are, aren’t we?” Harry doesn’t have enough mental energy to drown stuff so he keeps his eyes ferociously locked on Sahara’s. “We always are.”

“There are ... some children, Harry, who *do* like to cause pain,” Dumbledore says. “Children born without empathy who do not have the necessary components to understand that eliciting fear and pain in others is morally repugnant.”

“So you think he was born a psychopath,” Harry snorts.

“The muggle term might not be entirely suitable but there is a ... magical equivalent,” Dumbledore says. “There have been studies that posit that children born under the influence of a love potion, children with a lingering impact of a love-manipulation compulsion, without any true love between the parents, cannot *feel* love. They are born without empathy.”

“That’s bollocks,” Harry finds his voice shaking. “How can that be true? So when a child is born from two parents who don’t love each other that child’s doomed to be a Dark Lord?”

How crazy is that?"

"Again, Harry, we are not talking of you."

Harry sucks in a sharp breath. It's mean, he thinks, Dumbledore's assumption that Severus didn't love his Mum or she didn't love him. It shows Harry, suddenly, just how much Severus is keeping back from Dumbledore.

"A love potion is coercion," Dumbledore goes on, unaware of the pain he's caused with his throwaway words. "It is not the same as a liaison between two consenting people who do not share love."

"Still, it's not the baby's fault, is it?" Harry says steadily. "It's wrong to think people are just evil because - because something evil happened to them."

Like being locked in a cupboard.

"I agree," Dumbledore says gently. "I have told you before that it is by our choices that we are judged and measured. Tom may have been ... limited in his ability to love but it did not dictate that he should go on to be what he has become. Tom has made many choices in his life, the choice to bully and hurt others, the choice to enjoy it, all of them have been entirely his own."

Harry bites his lip. He agrees, he knows he does, and he remembers Tom's own glee in his pain, over and over, but something feels wrong. Something hurts.

"Perhaps you know something of that, Harry," Dumbledore says quietly. "The choice to hurt others."

"What do you mean?" Harry frowns.

"One hears rumours," Dumbledore gives him an airy look. "You have been distinguishing yourself in Defence?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry says blandly, refusing to be drawn on the topic. "And it's not fair to say that Tom made his choices in that horrible place. Yeah, killing a rabbit and all that cave stuff sounds bad but you - you don't *know* what they did to him, you can't say he should have made better choices he was just a *kid* -,"

"There are many abused children who do not resort to terrorising other abused children," Dumbledore says. Harry whips his head up and can't help but glare at him. Just for a second, he can taste the lemony tang of the man's magic and all through his mind and heart, all Harry can hear is the caw of the Black magic. *Justice*, the Black Prince's voice echoes through his veins. Dumbledore looks away, his eyes troubled.

"Maybe your expectations of abused children are too high," Harry says tightly. Weirdly, he thinks of Sirius. "Did you try to help him?"

"As you saw, Tom did not want my help," Dumbledore's voice is sombre. "He was self-sufficient and abrasive."

“He was eleven,” Harry frowns.

“An eleven-year-old who already preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. Death Eaters who claim they understand him are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.”

“Or he wanted one when he was four and alone and scared and no one ever came,” Harry mutters. He remembers suddenly what Sirius said to him on the roof of Grimmauld Place last year. *No one ever comes to rescue you.* “So he decided it wasn’t worth it.”

“Is it possible, Harry, that you feel sorry for Lord Voldemort?” Dumbledore’s tone is light but the words hit Harry straight in the chest. Sahara hisses and rears up. Harry strokes her, letting lightning jump out of his fingertips and into her scales. It helps a little bit, but it doesn’t stop the anger creeping into his voice.

“I don’t feel sorry for Lord Voldemort, I don’t feel *sorry* for the monster who killed my Mum and James and Cedric and let Bellatrix cut me up like a - a fucking butcher,” Harry says, trying to stop his voice from shaking. “I feel sorry for the orphan stuck in that dump. He had no one.”

“Yet as we know, Harry, not all orphans become Dark Lords.”

“You don’t want me to feel sorry for him,” Harry takes a deep breath and thinks of the library. He throws down his books and drowns them and then looks into Dumbledore’s face. His chin rests on his tented fingers and he looks guarded. “Why don’t you want me to do that?”

“You have always been compassionate,” Dumbledore says, his voice almost reflective.

“But I can’t feel compassion towards a ten-year-old orphan?”

“A ten-year-old Voldemort, Harry.”

“He wasn’t Voldemort!” Harry snaps. “He was just a messed up boy -,”

“Voldemort wants you to believe he understands you, Harry,” Dumbledore leans forward. “He wants you to believe that in some way, you are the same. I think it is important you remember all the ways that you are *not* like Voldemort.”

“How can I do that when you look at me like he’s going to burst out of my fucking eyes?” Harry mutters. Dumbledore stares at him intently.

“I think you know why I do that, Harry,” Dumbledore says.

Harry knows why. Harry knows that at every moment since Voldemort came back, maybe since Harry was eleven and met him for the first time, Dumbledore has been watching Harry for signs of Tom. He is fighting very hard to swallow his anger but it's swelling up inside him and for a second, he meets Dumbledore’s eyes. He can’t help it, he wants to prove that Tom isn’t there. Instantly, he knows he’s made an idiotic mistake. He feels a soft, stinging pain, like a needle prick and he doesn’t mean to, but immediately and unwanted, a memory of him

standing in his Defence class and casting black fire out of his wand rises to the surface. Harry looks away, gulping back nausea. Now that he knows Dumbledore's legilimency well enough he feels it almost every time. A sickly invasion that leaves a grapefruit bitter taste in the back of his throat.

"Not a rumour then," Dumbledore whispers.

"Gotta ask, sir," Harry chokes out. "Do you mean to do it, when you use that charm? Or is it just, like, natural as breathing?"

"I fear the second," Dumbledore says regretfully and Harry realises something about Dumbledore. If Severus is a natural occlumens, Dumbledore is a natural legilimens. He sees things all the time, things he shouldn't.

"You don't cast it, do you?" Harry asks, taking steady breaths and stroking Sahara's scales. "Or you don't need to. It's a natural gift."

"Yes," Dumbledore says. Harry nods. "Can you forgive me?"

Harry shakes his head.

"There are plenty of times you've done it knowingly and even if you don't, you should learn to control it," he says shortly. *You've had fucking long enough to learn.* "It's not nice."

"I have only ever done what I have needed to do for your protection, my boy, which is why I must now ask this question," Dumbledore says. Harry holds his breath. "Did Mr Nott teach you how to wield the *protego diabolica*?"

"Theo?" Harry's head jerks up but he's careful to only look at Fawkes over Dumbledore's shoulder. "No, why would you think that?"

"His family, Harry -,"

"If we're judging people by the people they grew up with then I should be serial killer or something," Harry snaps. "What do you have against Theo?"

"Nothing personally, but I fear he is not ... suitable," Dumbledore says quietly.

"Because he's a boy?"

"No, Harry, because you are yourself," Dumbledore's voice is almost sad. *I could get him hurt*, Harry thinks.

"You didn't have a problem with Cedric," Harry's mouth feels dry.

"I did not know about Mr Diggory," Dumbledore's smile is very melancholy. "You do have a habit of keeping your liaisons secret."

Harry hates the implication that if Harry had told Dumbledore about Cedric, he would have warned Cedric off him. *Because I'm dangerous. I get people hurt.*

“And that’s surprising?” Harry’s voice is harsh. “That I might want some fucking privacy?”

“It is not at all but if you had asked my advice, Harry, I would have recommended that you not engage in these types of entanglements.”

“What, stuff with boys?” Harry looks shrewdly at Dumbledore’s eyebrows. Though he can sense a lie somewhere, he can’t quite work out where.

“Harry, I promise you, I have no notion of judgement when it comes to the gender of whom you choose to love,” Dumbledore says with a small smile. “You’ll remember that my brother was long rumoured to be in love with a goat, and I could not have been happier for the pair.”

Harry snorts with laughter and then sort of hates himself for it, because when Dumbledore is like this, when he’s the twinkling, joyous, teasing teacher and not the stern, ruthless general of war Harry has come to know him as, he’s *amazing*. Harry immediately thinks of everything he really misses about Dumbledore, the grandfatherly advice, the silly jokes, the excellent sense of humour, and feels bereft.

“Then why aren’t you happy for me?” he manages to croak out. “My boyfriend *died*, like, I never thought I would ever even ... you should be happy for me.”

“I would be,” Dumbledore’s face is so earnest that Harry can’t help but believe him. “If it were not Mr Nott.”

“Why?”

“Because Lord Voldemort is cruel,” Dumbledore says gravely. “As you have witnessed. The House of Nott has been allied with Lord Voldemort since he was a child at this very school. I saw their alliance grow in this very castle. He has a hold upon the House of Nott like no other and he will punish a traitor most horribly.”

“So you think I should have just left Theo to be a Death Eater?” Harry snaps. He remembers the bruises on Theo’s arms, the cigarette burns. *Not a fucking chance*.

“Mr Nott soon will be a Lord alone,” Dumbledore says softly. “It would be understandable if the urge to return to Voldemort’s flank re-emerged.”

“You think he’d betray me?” Harry laughs and shakes his head. “Jesus, that’s the fucking *least* of my worries.”

“Is that why he taught such a dark charm?”

“It *isn’t* a dark charm!” Harry exclaims. “It’s just very powerful!”

“And you are not adverse to a little power right now,” Dumbledore quotes Harry’s words from Grimmauld Place last year back to him in a soft, knowing voice. Harry flops back against the chair and slaps his hands over his face.

“Theo didn’t teach me,” Harry mutters, his words muffled. “I swear.”

“Then who did?”

Harry doesn't speak. He won't give Severus up.

“You need to tell me.”

Dumbledore's voice is getting less soft. Harry stares at the ceiling, his hands still resting on his cheeks.

“Harry, if you are practising Dark arts inside the school, I must know,” Dumbledore's voice is stern. “It is a disciplinary matter.”

“Great! if it's a disciplinary matter then you have to involve my Head of House!” Harry yells at the ceiling. “And my legal guardian, and probably the Goblin King and everyone fucking else! But I'm not talking about this until you do!”

He expects Dumbledore to back down. What he does not expect is Dumbledore to cross to the fireplace and throw in some floo powder.

“*Castello de Creature!*” Dumbledore calls into the fire.

“No, wait,” Harry scrambles around in his seat, Sahara slithering up around his neck. “Remus can't come here, the Ministry -,”

“Does not have access to my floo and Remus is still a member of the Order of Phoenix, even in Venice,” Dumbledore finishes. “Will you step through, Remus?”

In a second, Remus is climbing out of the fireplace. He looks quite nice, in his three-piece tweed suit without the jacket and his eyes widen when he sees Harry.

“What is it? What's going on?” Remus quickly crosses from the fireplace and pulls Harry into a hug. Harry is so surprised for a second that he doesn't move, then he realises he is actually being hugged by his adopted father who he didn't think he would get to see until Christmas and takes a deep breath, clenching his arms around Remus' waist.

“Nothing,” Harry mumbles into Remus' tweed, rubbing his face against it resisting the urge to press his nose into it just to breathe in the scent of him. “Just, you know, getting in trouble for stuff that's not my fault.”

“How often do you say that?” Remus chuckles lightly and cups Harry's face. His eyes are full of eager delight and Harry wonders if this is how normal children feel when their parents look at them. *Warm. Wanted.* “Even for the things that *are* your fault?”

“Not as often as you'd think.”

Remus smiles and turns to Dumbledore.

“Is something the matter, Albus?”

“One moment, Remus,” Dumbledore turns back to the floo and tosses in more powder.
“Severus Snape!”

“What, Albus?” Severus’ voice is very clipped. “I’m in the middle of a brew.”

He’s actually probably just finished the day with Theo, Harry thinks, looking at the clock on the bookshelf behind Dumbledore. Theo will be sitting down for dinner with the rest of the Slug Club. Oddly, Harry feels a bit envious of all of them, having a nice dinner with Theo. He’d risk a lot to have a nice dinner with *just* Theo.

“Could you step through, Severus?” Dumbledore asks. “There is a disciplinary matter with one of your students.”

There is a long pause and then Severus answers.

“One moment.”

Harry winces. In those two words, he can tell that Severus has worked out exactly which student is being talked about and is probably really fucking pissed about it. Remus glances at Harry in surprise but subtly squeezes his shoulder, encouraging him to sit back down. The floo bursts into life and Severus steps out. He’s clearly been brewing all day because he’s only thrown on his outer robes over his white shirt and hasn’t even redone the collar properly. His eyes flit over Remus and Harry. If he’s surprised to see Remus he doesn’t show it and promptly glares at Albus.

“Explain,” he says curtly to Harry, but Harry shakes his head, leaving words behind his eyes for Severus to grab: *Not me*. Severus’ eyes turn to Albus. “Albus?”

“Take a seat, Severus, Remus,” Dumbledore gestures his wand and two extra chairs appear on either side of Harry. Remus sits on his right and Severus on his left. Harry takes a second to breathe in the combined scent of them, Severus’ smoky sage scent and the sharp, pine smell of Remus’ creature magic. It makes him think of Spinners End and the way the scent of Severus’ brewing leeches into the sofa cushions and Remus’ chocolate ends up smudged on the corners of the books. *Home*.

“*You miss your nest,*” Sahara hisses quietly. Harry doesn’t want to answer in parseltongue in front of Dumbledore so he just nods. It’s strange. He’s never really ever been at Hogwarts and thought there is somewhere else safer, or that there is somewhere else he’d rather be. Even when he thought it on occasion last year he never thought it would be a permanent change. He always assumed Hogwarts would feel like home again soon, but it hasn’t. Around him, he feels the mournful song of Hogwarts drifting towards him.

It’s not your fault, Harry finds himself thinking at the castle. *It’s good, really. To have more than one safe place, right?*

Hogwarts doesn’t answer but he feels a quiet chime inside him that feels like assent.

“We have something we need to discuss,” Dumbledore continues gravely, his eyes fixed on Harry. Harry remembers what Bill said about Dumbledore sensing magic and wonders,

suddenly, if Dumbledore feels something when Harry talks to Hogwarts. He promptly scowls.

“No, you want to discuss it and I won’t discuss it so you’re finding a way to *make* me discuss it,” Harry grumbles, folding his arms.

“Clarify,” Severus snaps, either at Harry or Dumbledore, Harry’s not quite sure.

“It’s come to my attention -,”

“*Come to your attention, yeah, right, like you didn’t fucking nick it from my mind -*,” Harry hisses under his breath.

“Tone,” Severus mutters.

“- that Harry has been practising the Dark Arts.”

“Excuse me?” Remus’ voice is shocked.

“How?” Severus asks. Harry stares deliberately at Sahara who sways in front of him softly, comfortingly.

“The *protego diabolica*,” Dumbledore says.

“No, how has this been brought to your attention?” Severus’ voice is sharp. “For Harrison surely did not tell you.”

“How do you know Harry didn’t tell me?” Dumbledore asks quietly.

“Because I know my child,” Severus says. Harry feels himself flushing. It’s really weird when Severus calls him his child. It makes Harry’s insides feel squirmy and he can’t work out if it’s a good feeling or a bad one.

“Because you asked him not to tell me?” Dumbledore presses gently. Harry does grimace then, but neither Dumbledore nor Severus seems to notice. They both stare at one another and Harry knows that Dumbledore knows the truth. Maybe Dumbledore’s known since he looked at the memory. *Maybe all that stuff about Theo was just Dumbledore being nosy.* “Why would you teach Harry this charm, Severus?”

“You taught him?” Remus looks at Severus.

“In defence lessons,” Harry says to Remus. “For the shield lesson in Defence Against the Dark Arts, it was for a *class*, it’s practically homework!”

“Why would it be necessary for you to give Harry additional tutelage, Severus?” Dumbledore asks, ignoring Harry completely. Harry realises that Severus hasn’t told anyone but Remus and Harry about his plan to avoid showing Harry’s power to Voldemort. Probably because he’s trying to avoid Harry showing his power to Dumbledore, too.

“Because I asked him to,” Harry says, improvising. If Severus is surprised he doesn’t show it. “It’s necessary, don’t you think?”

“For what, Harry?” Dumbledore asks quietly.

“Are you kidding? Sirius *died* right in front of me because I didn’t know how to fucking duel,” Harry says harshly. Remus instinctively reaches out to grab his hand.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Remus says quietly.

“I want to be better next time,” Harry realises that he’s speaking the truth. Maybe this is why his lesson with Severus felt so fucking good at the time. “Next time, I want to know what I can do.”

“And you think that a dark spell might have kept Sirius alive?” Dumbledore asks.

“I think a *protego diabolica* could have kept Bellatrix at bay,” Harry says staunchly.

“Harry, there is no magic alive that can stop death,” Dumbledore says humbly. Harry hesitates. He feels the tether between him and Severus tighten as if Severus knows what direction his thoughts are going.

You do not stop me, Master; Death’s voice echoes in his mind. *You are part of me.*

“Does that mean I shouldn’t learn?” Harry demands, trying to ignore Death’s voice in his head.

You cannot ignore yourself, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind. Harry shoots her a glare.

Not helping.

“He’s my Sire, he’s allowed to teach me whatever he wants.”

There’s another flicker in the tether between him and Severus but Harry tries not to show that he feels it.

“If it was truly done with teaching in mind, then yes,” Dumbledore’s eyes drift to Severus’ face. Severus says nothing but glares back. They seem to be doing that thing where they have a fight without moving or speaking. Harry shrugs to himself and watches as Sahara uncoils herself and moves to the floor, staring at Fawkes. The phoenix trills and swoops around her head.

“*Don’t eat him,*” Harry hisses at her.

“Play nicely, Fawkes,” Dumbledore says absently, not taking his eyes off Severus, but Sahara and Fawkes seem to be quite comfortable with one another. Sahara is hissing in a low, melodic croon that means nothing whilst Fawkes chirrup as he swoops. Harry’s glad Kreacher isn’t here. He’d take one look at Fawkes and think: *pie*.

“And what does that mean? Truly done with teaching in mind?” Remus demands.

“Albus wishes to imply my motives are ... impure,” Severus says slowly. Harry whips his head around to stare at Severus.

“What the fuck?” Harry demands.

“Language,” Severus snaps, not breaking his gaze with Dumbledore.

“How could they be impure?” Remus’ grip on Harry’s hand is tightening. Between Severus’ tether and Remus’ hold, Harry wonders, yet again, if they are planning on doing a runner. When they are both like this, when Remus is stiff with the violence he is holding inside and Severus is as still as Sahara before she strikes her prey, Harry feels like they are seconds away from unleashing hell on his behalf.

“It is what a father wishes, is it not?” Dumbledore says softly. “To have a powerful child? Especially a father who has always had to prove himself.”

Severus looks like he has stopped breathing. Harry sees shadows that no one else can spot unfurling from Severus’ Prince ring and, without thinking, he reaches out his left hand to clamp on top of Severus’ Prince ring, because he’s worried Severus might open the nothing-place with his fury. Severus doesn’t even look at Harry but he instantly turns his hand over to grasp Harry’s fingers. His touch on Harry’s damaged left hand is surprisingly gentle. Harry doesn’t know how he’s remembered to be kind when he looks like he’s about to rip the world apart.

“Is that what I am?” Severus says quietly. Dumbledore shrugs modestly and Harry wants to hit him in the face with a firebolt. Sahara rears and Fawkes flaps his great orange wings higher to get out of her reach, looking balefully at Harry.

“*Be nice,*” Harry hisses at Sahara. “*It’s not Fawkes’ fault.*”

Sahara settles back down and Dumbledore nods, approvingly. Harry looks at their familiars, hoping Dumbledore doesn’t see behind Harry’s eyes that if it was Dumbledore Sahara had threatened, he’d have no fucking problem with it.

“There would be no shame in admitting that you wished to test your son,” Dumbledore says.

“Test me?” Harry looks at Severus but Severus won’t stop staring at Dumbledore. Harry can feel the heavy coldness of the Prince stone under his fingers which sings of icy stars far away. Harry looks at Remus instead, but Harry realises that Remus’ eyes are very, very orange. “Moony?”

“How dare you?” Remus whispers. “To suggest that Severus has *anything* else in mind but Harry’s survival?”

“Harry is powerful,” Dumbledore says flatly. “He killed someone this summer.”

“I didn’t mean to!” Harry protests. “Prongs is - is weird right now!”

“And a patronus, which is hardly a dark spell,” Remus snaps.

“Which is only testament to his growing power,” Dumbledore continues. “To expose a child like him to the dark arts -,”

“It is your belief that I would put my child in danger?” Severus’ voice is deadly quiet and Harry knows, right then, that Severus is occluding, killing things and burying them rather than letting himself be eaten by rage. Harry does something he’s never done and gently squeezes his fingertips, hoping it’s some kind of moral support at least.

“I believe that you want his safety above all else,” Dumbledore leans forward intently. “I believe that it might blind you to dangers in the future, especially the dangers of exposing such a powerful child to Dark arts -,”

“Do you truly think that I, of all people, Albus, would underestimate the lures of power?” Severus asks dangerously.

“Then why this spell?” Dumbledore presses gently. “Why a dark spell?”

“It’s not dark!” Harry explodes, because he’s had enough of this bullshit. “It’s magic! It’s not moral, it’s just *there!*”

“Harry,” Dumbledore smiles wearily. “Magnus Bane’s philosophy may be attractive but it’s not entirely correct, there *are* evil spells -,”

“No, *people* make spells evil -,”

“And people create spells which carry inherent darkness in them,” Dumbledore insists, and Harry finds it utterly infuriating.

“The wards that you put around Privet Drive last year meant nobody sent me any fucking letters, they weren’t considered *dark* were they?” Harry snaps. “But leaving me in that utter shithole for months with no one, leaving me to *die* -,”

“Your life was not at any risk, Harry,” Dumbledore says quietly. “If Mr Nott had not absconded with you the alerts around the house would have informed me -,”

“I would have *killed* myself!” Harry explodes, leaping to his feet. Remus is quick, throwing out a hand to grab his wrist as if to stop Harry from launching himself across the desk at Dumbledore. “If I hadn’t met Theo, if you had left me there all fucking summer, I would be dead!”

“Harry,” Remus swiftly stands between Harry and Dumbledore’s desk, pulling both of Harry’s hands up to his chest and pressing them flat against his shirt. The sparks in Harry’s hand singe the fabric and Harry reckons it must hurt, but Remus doesn’t even flinch. “Calm down. Feel my heartbeat.”

Harry’s too far gone to do either of those things. He glares at Dumbledore, deliberately holding the memory of Dudley and Piers cornering him with the whip made of barbed wire behind his eyes. *You want to see secrets, you neglectful bastard? See this one.*

“You used all light spells when you arranged for me to be fucking abandoned *again*,” Harry goes on, his voice trembling as he glares at Dumbledore past Remus’ shoulder. “But you can’t tell me that what you did wasn’t *fucking evil* !”

“Language, *farzandam*.” Severus jerks Harry’s elbow with his hand and Harry turns his eyes to his Sire where he sits in his chair, unable to hold back the memory that’s playing on a loop behind his eyes. He feels Severus take it, feels him see it. Severus shows no reaction but he squeezes Harry’s elbow firmly. “Breathe and *think*.”

Harry knows what that means. He closes the book of the memory and throws it down into the water of the lake inside his mind. He stares at the lake until it is frozen over. *I don’t care, I don’t care, I do not fucking care*. Harry takes a deep breath and stares into the amber rings of Remus’ eyes.

“Count,” Remus prompts softly. “One hundred -,”

“Ninety-nine,” Harry croaks out. The tethers around his wrist between him and Severus are so taut, Harry’s surprised Severus hasn’t leapt to his feet to stand beside him but just feeling it there is comforting. “Ninety-eight, ninety-seven -,”

“As much as I am sure this interests you, Albus, it is not your business how we choose to parent, train or privately educate our child,” Severus’ voice is icy and Harry can’t even imagine what lengths Severus is going to in order to bury his anger inside his mindscape. Harry can almost imagine the frozen forest, the ground hard with snow. Strangely, that thought is calming and he finds himself imagining snow softly drifting through his library, settling on the books.

“Good, Harry,” Remus whispers. “Ninety-six, ninety-five -,”

“I am afraid it is my business, gentlemen,” Dumbledore’s voice is intensely regretful. “I have seen before what happens when troubled, powerful young men are given too much power.”

Harry thinks of the Contessa and the promise he made her: *there will come a time when they tell you that you have too much power. I want you to promise that you will not listen*. For all Dumbledore has told him, over and over, that they’re not talking about Harry and they’re talking about Tom, it seems they are once again talking about both of them. *Even Slughorn’s party would be better than this*, Harry thinks, and at that point, decides he’s had enough. Sahara climbs up his body and he remembers her words from long ago: *you are right to leave this hostile nest*. Harry makes a choice.

“I’ll tell you what,” Harry takes a heavy breath and steps back from Remus. “I’m going to go to a party with my super unsuitable secret boyfriend in our apparently doomed-to-failure fucking relationship and you can all sit here and discuss whether or not I’m the next Dark Lord.”

“Who told you your relationship was doomed?” Remus demands, eyes flickering to Dumbledore, which Harry finds a little ironic since he wouldn’t necessarily put Remus in the “pro-Theo” camp.

“Who said you were the Dark Lord?” Severus mutters, tenting his own fingers and staring at Dumbledore.

“See? Looks like you have a lot to talk about and I don’t need to hear *any* of it.” Harry says emphatically. “Have fun. Bye.”

Harry reaches up and kisses Remus briefly on the cheek, tightens his tether with Severus for a second, and then crosses the room and slams the door open. As he does, Fawkes lands on his shoulders for a brief second, brushing his head against Harry’s for a soft moment before flying away. Sahara hisses quietly, not meanly, almost mournfully and suddenly Harry feels weirdly tearful. He does like Fawkes and as he watches the bird float back into the room, he feels for the phoenix some of the old love and care that he felt for Dumbledore. A man who he thought would always protect him, a man who is dying, slowly, and in his death, Harry will still lose something and that feels nastily unfair. He can feel Dumbledore’s eyes on him but won’t look. It costs too much. Slowly, he lets the door close behind him and blinks his tears away.

“The bird is kind,” Sahara hisses.

“So is the man, sometimes,” Harry hisses back, *“ but kindness isn’t enough any more.”*

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta:@elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website:emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

The Golden Couple

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, A dinner party.
Next time, A trip to Hogsmeade.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Under the cover of the first course being served, Blaise lowers his voice to mutter to Theo.

“What is it?”

“Legilimency,” Theo whispers into his wine glass. He notices that Granger is glaring at him with an eyebrow raised and Theo subtly taps out the word ‘legilimency’ in morse code against the table top. It’s not something wixen are particularly familiar with, and only Granger watches his fingers and then widens her eyes. She glances at Slughorn and immediately drops her eyes to her plate. Luckily, small conversations break out around the table as they start to eat, Slughorn regaling Draco with tales of his father’s prowess at school, and Blaise speaks quietly so only Theo can hear.

“I wonder what a person would be looking for,” Blaise mutters. Theo understands. *Why would Professor Slughorn casually use an illegal spell on you?*

“Someone once told me secrets are currency,” Theo says.

“Indeed?”

Theo is about to respond but the door opens. Everyone turns to look and Theo tries not to drop his fork when he sees it’s Harry. Theo stares at him, hiding his surprise. *You’re not supposed to be here.*

“Hello,” Harry says awkwardly. “Sorry, I had a meeting with the headmaster.”

Blaise recovers quickest, standing up abruptly.

“You are most welcome, *amore*,” Blaise says. “Have my seat -,”

“Thanks,” Harry mutters, taking the seat beside Theo.

Are you okay? Theo thinks hard, through the bond, pressing his knee against Harry's.

Yeah, Harry's thoughts float back to him. *Just Dumbledore stuff.*

That does not make Theo feel better, but he has more immediate worries.

Protect your mind, he thinks to Harry and when Harry glances casually at him, Theo looks at Professor Slughorn. Theo knows Harry's got the message when Harry immediately ducks his eyes to make sure Slughorn doesn't meet them.

"Harry, m'boy!" Slughorn pushes back his chair in excitement, waving his wand so that another, equally grand chair appears to the right of Harry's for Blaise to sit back down in. "How wonderful of you to join us! The Golden Couple together!"

Theo reaches for the bottle of wine and carefully tops up his own glass before pouring one for Harry. Theo knows it's a terrible idea for them to be even a little uninhibited in this crowd but if Theo is going to endure Slughorn calling the love of his life and Blaise 'the golden couple' then he is going to need at least a little bit of alcohol. He takes a quick sip and is instantly gratified that he spent most of his childhood drinking Nott mead. It is significantly stronger.

"Thank you," Harry says quietly, eyeing Theo's large glass compared to his smaller one. "Any good?"

"It is quite lovely," Blaise says on the other side. "A Barolo, Professor?"

"Of course, you Italians know your wine," Slughorn chuckles. "Only for the sixth years and seventh years, of course, or Professor Dumbledore would have my head!"

He wags his finger playfully at Ginny Weasley and the Carrows who all smile tightly but seem very unimpressed.

"Muggles can't purchase alcohol until they are eighteen," Granger says quietly.

"Ah, it is seventeen in the wizarding world, Miss Granger," Slughorn says with an indulgent smile. "But as the only one here with experience of the muggle world -,"

"I grew up muggle too," Harry says, sipping his wine. When he sets the glass down, Theo notices how Blaise gently moves it away from Harry. No doubt he's remembering Harry drinking vin brule in the Giardino last year and getting a little fuzzy headed, very quickly, which is not surprising since he is so fucking thin. It seems to Theo that he's rapidly losing any weight he put on over the summer, but Theo can't *make* Harry eat. Sometimes, he wishes that students didn't have to dine in the Great Hall, so Harry could at least eat properly away from the plethora of prying eyes that seem to shrink his appetite down to nothing. Even though he knows it's a futile gesture, Theo pushes the bread basket towards him.

"You did?" Slughorn leans forward eagerly. "How *fascinating*, and now you're a twice named Lord Apparent and engaged the Heir of Magical Europe!"

"The Head of the Congregation is not an inherited position," Draco says coldly.

“Nor is the Minister for Magic,” Daphne says.

“Lord Greengrass is Head of European relations, isn’t he?” MacLaggen snorts. “Bit ironic for you, isn’t it, Greengrass? Has Potter-Black stopped you following in your father’s footsteps?”

“Is that what I am?” Harry glares at MacLaggen. “Head of European relations?”

“Well, if it has ‘head’ in the title,” MacLaggen snorts into his wine glass.

Blaise simply smiles his most charming smile at MacLaggen and toasts him sardonically. MacLaggen scowls.

“Jealous, huh?” Harry gives him a smug grin and leans back in his chair, looking for a second, the spitting image of his supposed father Sirius Black. When he wants to, Harry does an excellent job of playing the part of the indolent, caustically charming heir to multiple houses. Theo has to look away.

“Of what?” Smith mutters. “We all know what you did for Diggory.”

It’s a nasty comment and hits right at the heart of Harry’s guilt. He scowls darkly and stares at his plate. Theo’s almost glad when Blaise puts his hand on top of Harry’s in a show of comfort. Underneath the table, Theo gently presses his knee and with it, his thoughts to Harry.

It wasn’t your fault.

“Since nothing will stop me being Lord Greengrass, I don’t think I have a problem,” Daphne says smoothly to Draco, reclaiming the conversation from Smith and MacLaggen but her eyes are flashing at the collected implied insult.

“Exactly,” Shafiq says quietly, glaring intensely at Draco. “And Lord Greengrass has earned his role as Head of European relations, unlike other Ministry officials we could name.”

Theo knows that whilst Daphne and Shafiq never speak, their fathers do. They hold the neutral block in the Wizengamot. Around the table, Theo sees alliances shifting, sees the Carrows eyeing Draco, sees the others glancing to Daphne or Harry. He notices Slughorn’s eyes over the rim of his glass, eyeing them all gleefully.

“Oh yes, the man who holds that position certainly *earns* their favour with the Contessa,” Draco snorts.

“What will the Contessa not give him?” MacLaggen chuckles. “And *why* does he always get what he want?”

“That’s an interesting implication, Smith,” Blaise’s voice is very dangerous and Theo sees Harry stiffen. “Care to elucidate?”

“Yes, do you?” Daphne say. Theo knows Daphne is fiercely proud of everything her father has accomplished with the Contessa. The idea that the accomplishments were sexual favours

is underhanded and vile. Whilst Blaise can bear any rumour or insult of his own name, Theo knows he will not stand for anyone sully the Contessa's.

"Now, now, gentlemen," Slughorn chortles and Theo thinks he sees all of the girls at the table roll their eyes. "Let's not get into politics. How do you like the wine, Harry?"

"It's fine," Harry shrugs, sipping from the glass. "I prefer mead."

Theo has to use all of his self-control not to choke. Under the table, Harry's knee presses against his. Theo feels a flush of heat run through his body and tries not to let his hands tremble as he sips his wine. He will not think about how much he wants Harry, or what he will do when they are finally alone, in bed, tonight.

"The duck is excellent," Granger says quickly, shooting Theo a slightly annoyed glance as if it's his fault that Harry said what he said. "Thank you, Professor Slughorn."

"You are most welcome, my Muggleborn Surprise," Slughorn smiles at her soppily and Theo doesn't know how she copes with such a patronising nickname. "It's still astonishing to me, not even a child of the Sacred Twenty Eight or a Noble House -,"

"Hermione's my heir," Harry snaps. He's clearly had enough of condescension. "She's my sister, she's Heir Potter, she *is* part of a Noble and Ancient House."

"Your *sister*?" Slughorn's eyes widened excitedly. "Now, I knew James Potter and I never imagined that he would play away -,"

"Black on the other hand," MacLaggen mutters, glaring at Harry.

"Probably fucked an ocean of muggles," Smith snorts into his wine glass.

"*Fuck you*," Harry hisses under his breath. Theo feels the parseltongue fall into his mind, even just from the touch of his knee and presses back, softly.

"We're not biologically related," Granger snaps, glaring at all of them. "Harry adopted me."

"Only Lords can adopt," Smith says quickly, staring at Harry.

"And I'm the Black and Potter Lord Apparent," Harry snaps.

"*Apparent*," MacLaggen scoffs. "Not Lord yet."

"Yet he wears a Lordship ring," Blaise says quietly. He takes Harry's hand on top of the table, or gently touches his wrist, since it is his left hand and that is the hand Harry allows very few people to touch. Theo tries not to look. There's an ache inside his chest and he knows it's the bond, wanting to take Harry's hand more boldly, stroke the skin around the black diamond, press kisses to his half finger and along his long scars and tattoos. He moves his foot slightly so that it crosses over Harry's ankle. Harry's foot presses against his shin. The contact helps.

"Is it a ring?" Smith snorts. "Looks like a deformity."

“You’re a fucking deformity,” Ginny Weasley snaps back.

“Yes, you are quite the unique pair!” Slughorn raises his glass. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen such a fascinating and promising engagement, not since your parents, Draco!”

“And look how that turned out,” Daphne mutters under her breath. Clearly she hasn’t forgiven Draco for his comments about her father. Ginny snorts with laughter. Draco glares at Ginny Weasley like he wants to curse her.

“At least my parents weren’t forced to marry because they got with child too early,” Draco mutters.

“And never stopped,” MacLaggen chortles. “Raising a bloody army, were they?”

“Yes,” Ginny Weasley gives him such a powerful, hateful glare MacLaggen looks taken aback. “And now you’re on our list so watch out.”

“Oh, Cormac, be careful!” Slughorn laughs loudly. “This little firecracker will make you regret it!”

“Some people are incapable of decorum,” Smith mutters.

“You’re really saying that? You?” Harry asks him and Theo knows, instantly, he’s thinking about how Smith spread rumours last year that Harry went down on his knees for the Triwizard cup. Smith blushes into his wineglass and averts his eyes.

“Dessert, everyone!” Slughorn says, clapping his hands. The main course disappears and cocktail glasses of tiramisu appear. Under the table, Theo feels something heavy move across his lap. For a second, he worries that Harry has actually reached over and grabbed his knee but he looks down and sees nothing. Then he feels heavy scales moving to his wrist and he realises that Sahara has shifted from Harry to him. Theo smiles into his tiramisu and relaxes under the feeling of Sahara’s strong, invisible body wrapping around his arm. It makes him feel closer to Harry.

“What is that?” Carrow suddenly exclaims, pushing her chair back and staring at Theo’s arm. “There’s something on Nott’s arm! I can feel it!”

Theo feels Harry stiffen beside him but Theo calmly strokes Sahara, hoping to prompt her into visibility. He thinks Harry must have spoken to her inside her mind, because she does. There are gasps around the table as she shimmers into existence. Draco glares at her at her sparkling scales. Harry takes a bite of tiramisu and seems to deliberately not look at her.

“Oh, your familiar! Hestia, don’t panic, it is only Mr Nott’s familiar.” Slughorn smiles and waves his spoon. “She has magical properties then? She can make herself invisible?”

“Yes,” Theo says, *because Harry made her magical*. Harry takes a sip of wine.

“Magnificent,” Slughorn’s greedy eyes rest on Sahara’s head, where it sits on Theo’s neck. His eyes dart up to Theo’s and he feels *something*. His mind shield springs forward and Theo automatically thinks his holy words to strengthen it further. *Sutr fares from the south/ with the*

scourge of branches/the sun of the battle-gods/shone from his sword. The magic flares inside his mind and the flaming shield ignites. Theo thinks he sees Slughorn frown slightly. Theo wonders what on earth the potions Master is doing, consistently trying to probe Theo's mind.

"You know that magical boomslangs have excellent properties for Potions, don't you, my young prodigy?" Slughorn goes on.

Sahara hisses and suddenly, she's gone.

"Ah, invisible again, is it?" Slughorn nods approvingly.

"Yes," Theo says, though he knows that the flash of green magic means Sahara hasn't become invisible. She's moved, invisibly, from Theo to Harry. Maybe Harry has moved her. Maybe he felt some of Theo's magic rising with his mind shield and has understood he was being attacked. "She tends not to enjoy being talked about as ingredients."

"Who does?" Harry mutters into his dessert. Their legs are still entwined and Theo feels Harry press his foot against Theo's shin, as if Harry wants to pull him closer.

"You think that because you have a snake you are special?" A soft voice whispers beside him. Theo glances at Hestia Carrow, but she has her eyes fixed on her dessert. "You've chosen the Contessa over the Dark Lord and he won't forget it."

"I see your uncle and aunt have been speaking to you," Theo breathes. Slughorn is talking to MacLaggen and small conversations are happening amongst others, Granger and Daphne, Longbottom and Ginny Weasley, but Theo can tell that both Harry and Blaise are listening to Hestia's words, under the cover of eating their desserts.

"I see your father taught you nothing of how to honour your name," Hestia says coldly.

"Are you honouring yours?" Theo's voice is soft.

"My great-great Aunt was an acolyte of Gellert Grindlewald, the Carrow legacy never ends," Hestia whispers scornfully. "I honour her to seek out Grindlewald's legacy, the next Dark Lord. You fail your ancestors by following anything weaker."

"The Notts only follow power," Theo mutters. "You have made a mistake."

"Your father would be ashamed of you," Hestia's voice is less than a whisper. "It is good that he is dead for if he was not, the Dark Lord would kill him for your weakness."

"I agree," Theo sips his wine. "It is good that he is dead."

"Are you enjoying the dessert, *amore?*" Blaise says loudly. "Almost as good as we had at home, in Rome, is it not?"

Theo tries not to stiffen at the familiarity of those words. He knows this is hard for Blaise, he knows it's hard for Harry but right at this second, with Blaise and Harry holding hands in front of everyone and talking about Rome where they lived together, it feels almost unbearable.

“Not as good,” Harry says neutrally. Theo feels Harry’s thigh press against his. Maybe Harry has felt his despairing thoughts through the bond, because he feels the warm pressure of Harry’s tenderness pressing back to him. *I love you*, it whispers. Theo takes a slow breath, the despair receding. *It’s only a show*, he thinks, letting the frangellico settle on his tongue. *Blaise and Harry is just a show. What Harry and I have is real.*

“You consider Italy your home now, Harry?” Slughorn looks disappointed. Harry slowly swallows a mouthful.

“My father is in Venice,” he says quietly.

“Your father is dead,” Draco says harshly. “Both of your fathers are dead. You are an orphan.”

“I have an adopted father,” Harry snaps.

“Counsellor Lupin,” Blaise says, with a smile. “He sits on the Creature Council. A valued member of our government.”

“Remus Lupin?” Slughorn’s eyes shoot up.

“Professor Lupin was the best defence professor we ever had,” Longbottom says staunchly.

“Better than Professor Snape?” Draco sneers. “Of course you think that, Longbottom, everyone remembers your boggart.”

“Oh yes, quite amusing,” Slughorn smirks.

“What would yours have been?” Longbottom snaps back. “Losing a Quidditch match?”

Draco’s frown darkens.

“Why are you even here?” Draco mutters.

“Now, now, Draco, Alice and Frank were, well, very special students,” Slughorn says, smiling at Neville fondly.

“And now they’re just special,” Draco murmurs. MacLaggen snorts into his dessert and Longbottom flushes darkly.

“Yeah? When was the last time you survived fucking days of the cruciatus curse?” Harry glares at MacLaggen and Draco.

“It’s fine, Harry,” Longbottom says quietly, glaring at them both. Theo is surprised that Slughorn hasn’t stepped in, but he’s actually looking between Longbottom and Draco in amusement, sipping his wine as if it is all an interesting show. Quite a few people are looking at Longbottom with curiosity, waiting to see what he will do. The Longbottom Lord-Apparent doesn’t take his eyes off the Malfoy heir. “This time next year I’ll be a Lord. I’ll be sitting on the Wizengamot with Harry and Nott and Bulstrode and I’ll be making decisions for my house and for the country, and you’ll be just the same as you are now.”

“Yes, the son of the Minister for Magic,” Draco drawls.

“Minister’s change, the Wizengamot changes them,” Longbottom’s eyes flash violet for a second and Theo is quietly impressed with him. “My seat will still be mine.”

“Will it?” Draco glares back. “I don’t know, Longbottom, twelve months is a long time.”

The implied threat ripples around the group. Theo watches Harry’s right hand clench on top of the table.

“Now, really, Draco, it’s hardly polite to say such things,” Slughorn chuckles. Theo wonders why he finds the son of the Minister of Magic threatening a Lord Apparent with death so fucking amusing. “Politics is politics, of course, but we’re all friends here.”

“Of course, Professor,” Draco smiles tightly. “It is only houses can lose their Lords in such interesting ways -,” his eyes flicker over to Harry. “- and then what comes after them can be so very ... disappointing.”

“I will shove your disappointment up your arse,” Harry hisses into his wine glass. Draco only smiles that very particular smile he has for Harry and Theo knows that he’s enjoying riling him up. Draco loves to be the focus of Harry’s ire. It makes Theo want to cut the smile off his face.

“After all, a Noble and Ancient House that claims a werewolf is hardly a noble and Ancient House at all,” Draco goes on.

“Is that so?” Harry glares at Draco and flexes the fingers on his left hand. There is a tremor of white light along his scars and Draco frowns. Theo wonders if Draco can feel it in the Sanctuary of the house of Black, the flickering rage of his Lord.

“You officially *claimed* Professor Lupin?” Flora Carrow stares at Harry in disgust. “You claimed *that* as your father?”

“Fuck you.”

Slughorn chokes on his wine.

“Now, now, Harry -,” Slughorn begins, but Harry’s eyes are flashing green behind his Potter glasses as he glares at Flora Carrow.

“You want to talk shit about werewolves, don’t do it in front of me,” Harry says coldly.

“It’s not talking shit to call a werewolf what it is,” MacLaggen sneers. “A creature.”

“You have a problem with creatures?” Harry snaps. “With Goblins and Centaurs?”

“Goblins are useful and centaurs are clever,” Flora Carrow says. “Werewolves are beasts.”

“Only for a matter of hours each month,” Shafiq mutters. “Your relatives are beastly all the time.”

Harry shoots her a grateful look and glares back at Flora Carrow.

“Goblins are *useful*?” Granger says scornfully. “That’s what people are, either useful or beastly?”

“Werewolves and goblins are not people, they are creatures,” Draco snaps. “And creatures have no place in Wixen society.”

“What an interesting perspective, Draco,” Blaise leans back in his chair.

“Yeah, especially given who your Great grandfather fucked -,” Harry starts.

“Will you shut *up* about the fucking Veela, Potter?” Draco snaps.

“I will when you stop bloody mouthing off like an *prat* -, ”

“You wait until my father hears about this -,”

“Oh, fuck *off*, Malfoy -,” Harry says loudly.

“Don’t speak to me like that, *mongrel*!” Draco shouts back.

“I’ll speak to you like I bloody like, you absolute *arse* -, ”

“Now, now, maybe the House of Black could settle down,” Blaise says in a deceptively light tone. “This is what happens with cousins, Professor.”

“Oh, yes, of course, through your mother, Draco,” Professor Slughorn smiles indulgently and shakes his head. “How nice for you to have a cousin your age.”

“It’s a delight,” Draco snarls at Harry. “To have a *pretender* in the seat of Lordship for the House of Black.”

“A pretender and a werewolf,” Hestia Carrow whispers. “*Torjurs Pur* indeed.”

“And what’s the motto of the House of Carrow? Let me guess. *Kiss some motherfucker’s robes*? Pathetic.” The glow around Harry’s left hand flickers and his voice seems to ring against the glassware. Theo presses the heel of his boot against Harry’s shin and thinks the words *Calm down*, over and over until he sees Harry let out a sharp breath and look down at his dessert.

“I’ve never hunted a werewolf,” MacLaggen announces to the group. Granger chokes on her tiramisu.

“Are you *deranged*?” She coughs. “Why would you say that?”

“Well, we were talking about hunting and I know Nott likes to hunt big game,” MacLaggen wiggles his eyebrows at Theo. “Something bigger than an nundu, hey, Nott?”

“Not bigger than a quintaped,” Ginny Weasley mutters.

“My father did not hunt creatures, or keep them as prey,” Theo says, shooting a significant glance at Draco who’s grandfather kept Veela. “Only beasts, fantastic or otherwise.”

“It’s common practise in some other cultures,” Smith says, glaring meanly at Harry. “They do it in North America.”

“No, in North America they hunt Wendigos!” Granger exclaims.

“Same thing,” MacLaggen shrugs.

“Are you able to read?” Daphne says politely. “Scamander’s accounts are very clear that Wendigos are a class five beast, they are not metamorphic creatures like werewolves, they are a possessive cannibalistic spirit that permanently alters the state of the possessed.”

“And I suppose you’ve never read an account of a werewolf eating a wizard?” Flora Carrow says snidely.

“You mean that she hasn’t readily absorbed Ministry propaganda about werewolves?” Granger snaps.

“Oh, come on,” MacLaggen rolls his eyes and looks at Shafiq. “They must do it in your country, right, Shafiq?”

“I’m from London,” Shafiq says quietly.

“And the Noble and Ancient House of Shafiq has held a seat in this nation for three hundred years,” Daphne adds.

“*Racist motherfucker,*” Harry hisses under his breath.

“You know what I mean,” MacLaggen sighs.

“*I know that you’re a racist,*” Harry hisses.

“Don’t hiss at me, Potter!” MacLaggen snaps. “You want to say something then say it!”

“You’re a racist,” Harry says loudly, glaring at him. “Better?”

Daphne smirks. Granger nods. Shafiq smiles as widely as a well controlled person like Shafiq can bear to.

“I’ve got nothing against muggleborns,” MacLaggen says blankly and Shafiq rolls her eyes.

“Oblivious,” Granger whispers under her breath, staring up at the ceiling. “Utterly, fucking oblivious -,”

Theo thinks he sees Daphne, very cautiously, hold her hand under the table. From the astonished look on Granger’s face, he’s right.

“Werewolves can be hunted in Pakistan,” Shafiq says quietly. “Though it is an illegal practise, much like the hunting of muggles.”

“Like the Death Eaters did,” Ginny Weasley glares at Draco. “At the Quidditch World Cup.”

“Now, let’s make no accusations, Miss Weasley,” Slughorn smiles, shaking his head fondly.

“I didn’t accuse,” Ginny Weasley says.

“You just heavily inferred,” Blaise smiles at her.

“Well, werewolf hunting will soon be legal here,” Draco smiles darkly at Ginny Weasley and then looks at Granger. “Along with other things.”

She glares back at him and sips her wine.

“Ever heard of a taser, Malfoy?” She says sweetly.

“I could have my weapons smith fashion a silver arrow, he’s a goblin, you know, he could do anything,” MacLaggen muses, his eyes fixed wickedly on Harry. “Would that do it do you think, Potter?”

“You’re asking me what I think about you *hunting* my father?” Harry’s voice is still maybe a bit too full of magic so Theo risks pinching him on the thigh under the table. “I think that if you fucking try it then I’m going to hunt *you*.”

“Well, coffee!” Slughorn announces, clapping his hands. “Let’s adjourn to the more comfortable seating to enjoy ourselves, shall we?”

The glasses of tiramisu vanish and coffee cups appear on the coffee table by the fire. Slughorn pushes back his chair and others follow. Blaise, Harry, Theo remain seated for a moment.

“I think I’m finished,” Harry says quietly. “This is awful.”

“Why did you come, anyway?” Granger asks, walking around to lean against the table beside Blaise as Daphne and Smith move towards the fire. “I thought you had your meeting?”

“Because believe it or not, I actually thought I was having a worse evening with Dumbledore,” Harry says bleakly.

“Legilimency?” Granger looks at Theo with a stern assessment in her eyes. He nods silently. Harry says nothing and neither does Blaise. Granger looks between them all and then adds: “Why?”

“Some people like secrets,” Theo shrugs. Granger frowns.

“It’s illegal!” she hisses.

“Yeah?” Harry grins at his sister. “Time turner, much?”

“Harry!” Granger looks shocked but can’t stop herself from grinning at her brother. “Don’t!”

“Excuse me, a time turner?” Blaise smirks and looks Granger up and down. “How do you consistently become more and more interesting?”

“Don’t flirt with me,” Granger rolls her eyes. “You’re Harry’s fiancé.”

“Just tell him to stop breathing, why don’t you?” Harry snorts and Blaise pushes him.

“What I mean is, why would he risk it?” Granger lowers her voice so only they can hear it.

“Because he thinks its worth it,” Harry shrugs. “And because he knows he can get away with it. Honestly, everyone keeps telling me this charm is illegal but it seems to me that its the kind of thing that must be, like, *impossible* to enforce if the person casting it is good, like they are.” Harry nods his head towards Slughorn but Theo knows he’s talking about the headmaster. “They’re good at it. They know they can get something out of it. So it’s not a risk, really, not for them.”

“That is ... true, yes,” Blaise says. “That’s ... insightful.”

“Just obvious,” Harry blushes, muttering as he takes a sip of wine to cover his embarrassment. Theo smiles at him as Granger looks both proud and a little amazed. Theo loves these moments when Harry shows his natural sharp wit, the way he sometimes sees right to the heart of things, to the centre of people’s intentions.

“Why you?” Granger asks Theo, looking at him curiously.

“He knew Apollonius,” Theo shrugs.

“He may have incorrectly assumed that whilst I would have adequate defences, you may not,” Blaise says quietly. “We need to be cautious about these meetings from now on.”

“This was pointless anyway,” Theo says softly. “The Carrows are not for turning.”

“You think?” Granger says sarcastically. “They’re literally some of the most unpleasant people I’ve ever had dinner with.”

“I agree,” Blaise whispers. “And I’ve had dinner with Prince Charles.”

Both Harry and Granger snort with laughter.

“Come now!” Slughorn calls loudly from the sofa. “I’ve made space for my Golden Couple!”

“I am not his fucking anything,” Harry breathes. “I’m done.”

Theo feels a surprising hand squeezing his knee and then words pressed through the bond: *See you in bed*. Theo nods softly and Harry rises. Theo can feel the imprint of his touch still burning on his leg. *Later*, Theo tells himself, which is what he tells himself every moment of every day right now; tells himself to hold back, not show too much, to hide his love and wait

for the nights when he and Harry are curled in bed together, for soft space inbetween two and six in the morning that thankfully still belongs to them and them alone.

“Sorry, Professor, I’m heading out,” Harry says flatly. He gives a small salute to Ginny and grins at Longbottom, before performing small bows to Shafiq and Daphne sat together by the fire. “Thank you for the food.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Granger says softly, and links her hand with him.

“Yeah, you can tell me why you were holding hands with Daphne under the table,” Harry nudges her with his shoulder.

“I was not!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry grins. For a second, he looks more like himself than he has all meal. Then he makes a show of putting a hand on Blaise’s shoulder.

“I’ll see you later,” he says loudly. Out of the corner of his eye, Theo sees Draco staring hard at the place where Harry touches Blaise.

“Later, *amore*,” Blaise says quietly.

Harry and Granger leave Blaise and Theo sitting at the table, quietly watching as Professor Slughorn begins to regale the seated students with yet another story.

“I don’t trust this man,” Blaise says quietly. “Nobody invites this many enemies to dinner without an agenda.”

Theo nods. He thinks of the way Professor Slughorn’s eyes had rested on Sahara at his throat. He remembers the greedy, urgent look there, the same look he has for Harry. It reminds Theo uncomfortably of the Dark Lord, offering a hand to Harry on the floor of the Ministry of Magic: *like he wants to collect him*. Narcissa was right about Slughorn. There is more to him than meets the eye.

“Neither do I,” he says.

— — — —

“You said *what* to Harry about Theodore?” Lupin demands, his hands clenching on the chair he stands behind. Severus notices the way the veneer of the wood dimples under Lupin’s fingers. He is very fucking angry. This, coupled with the fact that it has been over two weeks since they have touched, is deeply unhelpful. Severus ignores the desire building in his belly and tries not to look at him.

“You must see the lack of wisdom in this coupling,” Albus says, gesturing towards his liquor cabinet with his wand. Glasses fly out and so does a dusty bottle of brandy. Clearly, this

conversation requires a stronger liquor than Albus' usual Kings Ginger.

"It is so wildly beyond your jurisdiction as a headteacher to comment on a student's relationship -," Lupin begins.

"It's basically beyond our jurisdiction to do it," Severus mutters, leaning forward to pour himself and Lupin generous glasses before pushing an empty glass and the bottle back towards Albus.

"Precisely!" Lupin exclaims. "Have you *any* idea how much time, how much effort has gone in to getting Harry to communicate?"

Practically my every breath since last Yule, Severus thinks, leaning back in his chair and sipping the brandy.

"Harry has always communicated effectively with me," Albus pours himself a drink. The curse in his hand is ugly. He will not let Severus look at it, but Severus imagines that the charred, dead necrosis of flesh has increased an inch down the wrist since he first treated it. If Albus somehow manages to survive the poison that will slowly leech into his blood over the year, he will likely lose all use of his arm.

"He fights you, that is not the limit of his communication style," Severus says.

"He is open with me, Severus, there is a difference."

"Is he?" Severus glares at Albus. "Are you sure it is not legilimency?"

He knows just from looking at the way Harrison had sat, sulkily slumped in his chair but with the tension in his neck so completely rigid, that there has been some type of altercation between them.

"I have a natural gift, Severus," Albus sips his brandy primly. "Some things I cannot help but see -,"

"I don't believe that," Lupin glares. "I don't believe that you ever do anything unintentionally. I think you took something from Harry's mind because you wanted to take it."

"Want is a strong word -,"

"Don't," Severus rolls his eyes. "Whilst one can be naturally gifted at the mental arts, one cannot engage them without will -,"

"So tell us why," Lupin says. Severus shoots him a frustrated look. He does not care why. He will not let Albus take things from Harrison's mind, that is just a fact, but Albus seems swayed but Remus' concern. He sets his glass aside and leans toward, tenting his fingers and resting his chin upon them.

"Harry has ... been expressing some concerning sentiments."

“Like what?” Albus gestures for Lupin to sit, but he refuses. Instead he stands in front of the chair, arms folded.

“Sympathy for Lord Voldemort,” Albus says. Lupin takes in a small breath but Severus narrows his eyes.

“In what context?” He asks slowly.

Albus hesitates.

“Lord Voldemort had ... a troubled childhood.”

Severus snorts with laughter and shakes his head.

“And you find that shocking? Worrying?” He sneers. “That a child who was also abused in his infancy might feel sympathy for a child with a similar upbringing?”

“Harry cannot become engrossed in the similarities between himself and Lord Voldemort,” Albus says earnestly.

“Then I wonder why you insist on reminding him of them,” Severus snaps.

“And *why* you fault him for being in a loving relationship when his capacity to love is clearly one of the biggest differences between them,” Lupin says sharply.

“Harry does have a tremendous capacity to love, he always has done,” Albus sighs heavily. “But Mr Nott -,”

“What do you disagree with?” Severus says softly. “His gender? His being a Slytherin?”

“He is not suitable.”

“How can you possibly preach unsuitability?” Lupin slams his hands down on Albus’ desk. Severus rescues his glass of brandy before it spills. “You married Gellert Grindlewald!”

Severus sucks in a breath. A piece of an unclear picture is slotting into place inside his mind, a swirl of rumours and hints from Bane and he stares at Albus, wondering if he will deny this claim which suddenly, seems entirely likely. Albus smiles slowly.

“Making use of the Congregation archives, I see, Remus?”

“Married in Salzburg in 1899, you were seventeen years old,” Lupin seems to recite, as if its a page in a book he’s seen inside his mind. *Seventeen?* Severus throws Lupin a wild look for a second and Lupin grimaces, as if he’s thinking exactly the same thing. Whilst young marriages are normal in pureblood society and the Sacred Twenty Eight both Lupin and Severus are adamantly against them. Permitting the child to maintain a farce engagement is their shared limit and they already share nightmares about the fidelity bond. *If our child wants to get married at seventeen, we will ground him for eternity.*

“Whilst it is flattering, extremely flattering to be included in the archives of the Congregation, it is not entirely factual,” Albus sighs. “We were ... bonded, but in an unusual way.”

Severus holds his breath. If it was a fidelity bond, he will lose his mind.

“How?” Lupin demands. He looks like he’s thinking precisely the same thing.

“A blood pact,” Albus said quietly. “Gellert was always fascinated with the Necromantic arts.”

Suddenly, Severus remembers Albus standing on the crest of the hill in sky with Severus’ son under his wand, Harrison’s blood runes fresh. At the time, Severus had been an exhausted whirlwind of rage and disbelief that Albus would even consider pointing his wand at Severus’ son. Now he sees what was hidden from him before.

“So this is it?” Severus says quietly. “This is why you are so wary of our son. It is not just his unusual connection to the Dark Lord.”

When Severus mentions it he swears that he sees Albus’ eye twitch slightly before he nods.

“You think he’s the next Gellert Grindlewald,” Lupin sits down heavily. Severus hands him his own glass of brandy since Lupin spilled most of his over Albus’ desk. Lupin sips it and hands it back to Severus without even looking at him. “Isn’t it enough, Albus, to be fighting one of Grindlewald’s legacies? You need to create another?”

“I notice that neither of you challenge the notion that Harry could be a necromancer,” Albus says quietly.

“I notice that you didn’t answer the question,” Severus says. Albus looks at him steadily.

“Why did you teach him that spell?” Albus asks. “The *protega diabolica*?”

“Because he can use it,” Severus says steadily.

“Can he use it without being corrupted by it?” Albus asks quickly.

“Yes.” Severus hopes he is right.

“Why did you teach him the spell?”

“He has answered the question,” Lupin snaps.

“Not fully,” Albus’ eyes rest on Lupin. “I think that you taught him because he is a Necromancer and you are still unsure as to the range of his power.”

Severus will not tell Albus the truth, that he is completely aware of the seemingly unlimited nature of Harrison’s power and that he taught his child the spell because for the Dark Lord, a revelation that Harrison can wield a known dark spell will be enough of a tidbit to sate him in the absence of Harrison wielding the raven magic in his defence class.

“I am not sure it is any of your business,” Severus says.

“Our families are intertwined, even if you do not like it, Severus,” Albus says calmly. “The Potters and the Dumbledores in Godric’s Hollow -,”

“You seem to forget that whatever you tell the Wizarding World, my son is *not* the pureblooded Potter heir you make him out to be. He is mine and Lily’s child. And now Lupin’s,” Severus adds, jerking his head towards the wolf who nods curtly, but continues to stare at Albus.

“He was blood adopted by the Potters, that matters to magic,” Albus says.

“It doesn’t not matter to me,” Lupin says coldly. “Or to Severus. He’s our son.”

“The object your son wears is not some mere trinket. It is the Peverell ring,” Albus looks between them carefully. “You will have heard of the Peverells?”

Severus feels a tightness in his chest. *Hadrian Peverell*. There is no way that Albus can know this was the name that Harrison first came into Severus’ life with last year, but it gives him pause all the same. *Where did Harrison get the Peverell name in the first place?* Then Severus is assailed by another question: *Does the ring have more than the Slytherin magic in it? Does it contain the Peverell magic too? If it does, why didn’t Harrison tell me?*

“The last Noble House to be Necromancers,” Lupin parrots. “Broke the Fell Accords and their house was dissolved.”

“But it did not die,” Albus’ eyes twinkle obnoxiously. Severus is assaulted by two memories. Lupin, showing him a thestral coat of arms in Grimmauld Place that he believed was the first instance of the Potter coat of arms last summer, at the moment he realised that the Peverells had the thestral coat of arms. He remembers Narcissa’s words: *All that is left of them is their coat of arms, a standing Thestral and a symbol like Grindewald’s mark. There are still items to trace, but it is my expectation that the male line of Peverell died out, only to be survived by an unrecorded daughter.*

“Not unrecorded,” Severus mutters and rubs his face. *A thestral. A triangular symbol.*

“Married. The last Peverell daughter married into the Potters.”

“The Potters are descended from the Peverell Necromancers?” Lupin stares between Severus and Albus. “That is what you’re hanging this on? That somehow, through James’ blood adoption, Harry’s a blood born Necromancer?”

“He is a Potter and he wears the ring. He cannot take it off.” Albus says solemnly. “Though he does not understand the powers of the Peverells -,”

“He’s only a *Potter* through an accident of fate and he only has that ring because you turned up on my fucking doorstep with a *cursed* object!” Severus leans forward, malice rising in him that he can’t control. It has taken too long, it has taken too much for him to claim his son back from James Potter. He has written his child’s name in the Prince Grimoire. *He is a true Prince, through and through, he is not a Potter.*

“Or because he is a Necromancer,” Albus looks entirely unfazed. “Because he is supposed to have it.”

At that word, both Lupin and Severus stiffen. Any notion of fate between them has long been disparaged. They cannot fight destiny so they will not give thought to things they cannot control. *We have too many other battles to fight.*

“No,” Lupin leans forward, hands gripping the arms on the chair. “He is supposed to be a child, he is supposed to be happy and safe!”

These things should not be so hard to achieve for our child, Severus thinks bleakly.

“There are things about the Peverells, things about Necromancers that neither of you understand,” Albus says impatiently. “Voldemort has no interest in Necromancy, he fears any connection to the dead -,”

“If this is about the prophecy -,” Lupin begins.

“The one to vanish the Dark Lord, he shall have powers the dark Lord knows not -,”

“Stop,” Severus holds up his hand but it doesn’t stop Albus from continuing on.

“That is not to mention the Shipton prophecy about Necromancers -,”

“Stop,” Severus stands up, glaring at Albus. “Enough. He is not the Necromancer you pit against the Dark Lord. No.”

“You can’t stop what’s already happening, Severus,” Albus looks at Severus with such compelling earnestness. *How easy it is for him,* Severus thinks, *to assure people that they have no recourse but to obey.* “I cannot stop Voldemort from seeing what he has seen and making the conclusions he has made.”

“We’re not asking you to control Voldemort, we’re *telling* you no,” Lupin’s voice is harsh. “You won’t use Harry this way.”

“Gentlemen, one of the problems of living as long as I have lived, having seen so many wars, muggle and wixen, is that I am no longer granted the privilege of refusing to see unfortunate truths,” Albus sighs, his face is lined. “Harry’s power cannot be ignored. The truth about what Harry is cannot be ignored either. He needs guiding on some very important matters and you cannot deny he is need of guidance.”

“He has more guidance than we know what to do with,” Lupin snaps. *And he barely listens to any of it,* Severus adds to himself.

“He needs guidance from someone with similar power levels to him, who has seen how his path can deviate,” Albus says quietly. “Do you think I have nothing of value to offer a young Necromancer? Having seen one grow first hand?”

Severus thinks these arguments might be compelling if he knew the truth, what Bane has explained to him and Lupin over and over again: *Harry might have Necromantic gifts but he’s*

a Mage. That's what matters and that's what needs to be hidden. Severus remembers the palpable relief on Harrison's face in the summer when Severus said the words: *you are not set in stone, farzandam.*

"Harry is not Grindlewald," Lupin says sharply.

"He killed someone over the summer, without remorse or censure. So did Mr Nott," Albus' blue eyes are suddenly sharp, almost vicious. *Theodore is more of a concern to him than I realised.* "They did it without grief. That kind of rationalisation between a pair of young people is familiar and worrying -,"

Severus is watching Harrison thrash in a nightmare, sweating and screaming.

"Murderer, murderer, I'm a fucking murderer -," Harrison whispers under his breath.

"You are not," Severus strokes his damp hair and hopes the sleep aid works and if it doesn't, tomorrow he will brew anew again. "You are not, farzandam."

"Do not tell me about my son's grief." Severus finds himself pointing his wand at Albus. There is thunder in his ears and the memory is so strong, he swears he can smell Harrison's sweat and torment on the air. "You know nothing of what he has felt or suffered this summer."

"Severus, don't," Lupin pushes his wand arm down. "What does it mean, then, that I pulled Lestranger's spine out? What does it mean that I would have killed Bellatrix if I could have? That I have done both without censure from anyone?"

"You are part of the Order of Phoenix," Albus says. "Harry is a child."

Severus snorts with derisive laughter. He stares at Albus and wonders at what point he completely lost faith in this man's ability to accurately understand Harrison.

"If you can ask to pit him as a Necromancer against the Dark Lord with one breath and tell him he's too young to commit murder with the next, then this conversation has reached its inevitable ignoble end," Severus says drily.

"I agree. We know who Harry is," Remus stands up, still holding Severus' wand arm clamped against his side. "He's our son. We had an agreement that he would return to Hogwarts and he would be taught by you. Teaching does not include your opinions of his relationships and if you do this again, we will withdraw him from school."

"Then our agreement would be void," Albus looks at Severus. "Under the terms of my agreement with Harry."

"Yes, I understand," Severus snaps. "So perhaps you could prioritise keeping your spy and Harrison in school over telling him who he can and cannot have a relationship with."

He feels Lupin carefully fumble down his arm to grab his hand, even where it grips his wand. Severus can feel the tension inside the wolf. Even here, even now, they are ready to do what they must if Albus refuses them. *You take him and flee, I go to the Dark Lord.* Severus is

glad, suddenly, of Lupin's ability to withstand legilimency and his own shields. For how would Albus react if he knew how close to taking their child and running they permanently are?

"I will not speak to Harry about his relationships," Albus says solemnly. "You have my word, gentlemen, if you will agree not to take him out of school."

Severus and Lupin exchange a glance. The wolf's eyes are very bright and his grip is furiously strong but those are the only tells of his internal turmoil. Lupin nods slowly.

"Agreed. For now." Severus says coldly. Albus smiles widely and leans back, as if this has been merely an interesting conversation and not a series of life-threatening ultimatums in which he casually dangled Severus' life in front of his eyes.

"I must say, gentlemen, I could never have foreseen this, but I am glad to see how well parenthood suits you," Albus says, eyes twinkling as he gestures towards their held hands. "And to see you both happy together again, of course. An unusual but ... compelling couple. Even golden, as Horace is so fond of saying."

Severus fights the overwhelming adolescent urge to pull his hand away from Lupin's and blush. *No. This man does not get to make me feel like I am seventeen forever.*

"Just as our son's relationship is none of your business, neither is the arrangement between us," Lupin says quietly, with more stalwart forbearance than Severus can ever imagine displaying. Albus merely inclines his head. The phoenix behind him trills merrily and Severus eyes it, darkly. *One day, I will have you for potions ingredients.*

"Well, goodnight then, gentlemen," Albus says, with the irritating habit he has of dismissing a person when they are already out of the door. Lupin throws in the floo powder and turns towards Severus.

"Will you come through?" He asks quietly. Severus nods. He does not give Albus a backward glance as he steps into the green fire and steps out in Venice. He blinks and looks around Lupin's apartments.

"You have moved," Severus says.

"Counsellor quarters rather than Ambassador ones," Lupin says, immediately moving to a small drinks cart on the left hand of the fireplace and gesturing for Severus to sit down on the sofa. He does, noticing the way Lupin's paperwork, dossiers with the stamp of the Congregation are spread out across the oak coffee table and there is half a glass of red wine leaving a ring on the brown paper. "Less formal, more comfortable."

"I see that." Severus takes the glass of wine Lupin is offering him. Rather than the overbearing gilt and expensive fabrics of the Ambassador apartments, the Counsellor quarters seem to be homey and warm with a lot of oak. Severus notices stacks of books beginning to encroach across every surface and hides his smile inside his glass of wine.

"Is this going to work?" Lupin asks flatly. "Albus believing that Harry is a necromancer?"

“Albus has a tendency to fixate upon his own theory,” Severus sighs, rolling the taste of the robust red around his mouth. It is very good, but of course the Contessa would not let any of her employees suffer a bad pinot noir. “So in short, yes. I think it might. Especially because he believes he is the only one who can understand Harrison.”

“Fucking arrogant,” Lupin mutters, picking up his wine and leaning a hand against the fireplace. Severus tries not to smirk, because it seems Lupin has picked up a few of Harrison’s turns of phrase. Severus takes a small second to admire the slight silver that is beginning to creep into Lupin’s hair, to catch the small changes in his lover that he has not been able to catalogue over the last few weeks.

“Gellert Grindlewald?” Severus asks.

“I know,” Lupin snorts and shakes his head. “Interesting perspective, isn’t it?”

“He taught the Dark Lord.”

“I knew that was a rumour,” Lupin frowns.

“It’s true,” Severus rolls the wine in the glass, watches its legs, musing. The little tidbits that the Dark Lord has boasted about over the years, of how many secrets Grindlewald divulged to him, are circling in his mind. “I wonder now if the Dark Lord pursued Grindlewald out of spite.”

“To spite Albus?” Lupin snorts. “I wouldn’t put it past him, but how could he have known of their marriage?”

“If you could find it, I’m sure he could,” Severus says drily.

“It changes nothing,” Lupin says. “We shouldn’t tell Harry. It will only drive a wedge between him and Albus.”

“We are opposed to that?” Severus asks, mainly because he isn’t.

“We need to maintain whatever fragile peace there is between them in order to protect you, Severus, and we can tell Harry when he’s graduated or when he’s ... left,” Lupin sighs, sipping his wine. Severus’ heart clenches. They do not speak of it often, the notion that it sometimes feels less and less likely that Harrison will safely see out the term let alone two more years of education, but it’s clearly ever present for both of them. There is a horrible reality where Lupin and Harrison have to hide abroad and Severus is cut off from them entirely that encroaches ever closer. *But it is not now*, Severus thinks fiercely. *Now, I have them both.*

“Or when Albus is dead,” Severus says, mainly to cheer himself up. “It shall not be longer than the summer at this rate.”

“Exactly,” Lupin toasts him sarcastically, but his eyes hold a slight hint of sadness. Severus knows how that it feels. It is an ongoing internal conflict; relief at a future that no longer

contains Albus' meddling and fear of fighting a war without a familiar General will be like. "So it changes nothing."

"Speak for yourself. I am reconsidering that every piece of unsolicited relationship advice Albus ever gave in a particularly hypocritical light," Severus says. Lupin huffs with laughter and shakes his head.

"Yes, you only fell in love with a werewolf," Lupin takes a sip of his wine and licks his lips. "He fell in love with a Dark Lord."

Fell in love with a werewolf, Severus thinks. *Past tense. Definitely not currently falling in love with.*

"I am delighted to be occupying the moral high ground."

"It is an exceptionally rare position for you."

Severus rolls his eyes and shrugs off his robe, leaning back on the firm sofa, feeling Lupin's eyes tracking his every movement, his open collar and rolled up sleeves. It is a comforting feeling.

"Harry doesn't look well," Lupin's voice is pensive. "He looks ... tense."

"He is," Severus nods shortly. He has not had any time alone with his son since their now rare impromptu defence lessons, just enough to keep Harrison ahead of the curriculum in Defence Against the Dark Arts so he knows what to expect, but he has noticed Harrison's reduced consumption at meal times, the tension he always carries in the back of his neck and shoulders, the tautness of his facial muscles. "It has been ... draining. Being the constant focus of public attention."

"I hoped it might be better for him this year," Lupin mutters, leaning his back against the stone work of the fireplace. "With Sirius gone ..."

"Unfortunately, the child proves the old adage that society shuns that which it fears, does not understand and cannot easily categorise," Severus sips his wine. "Being unsorted, living in Slytherin, being ... what he is, it causes suspicion in the other students. Those that don't already despise him for his politics or for the betrayal of his so-called Gryffindor father -,"

"I do hope you're talking about Sirius and not me," Lupin mutters.

"- find it easy to shun him for the reasons of others. Then there is the fact that many of them have been raised to distrust the Congregation and European influence and they ... fear and envy the combination of Harrison's power and heir Zabini's."

"I see." Lupin takes a slow drink of his wine. "With all that in mind, Severus - why did you teach him the spell?"

"Because he wanted to learn," Severus sighs.

"Severus."

“Remus.”

He holds the gaze of his lover for a long second.

“Don’t give me half truths,” Lupin whispers.

Severus sets his wine down and looks up at the crown moulding on the ceiling.

“He wanted to learn and I wanted to teach him and ...” Severus hesitates. He remembers the look in his child’s eyes as he held his hand over the flames. He remembers Eileen’s voice: *Magic isn’t moral, Sev.* “I believed he could cast it. I believed that he could control it.”

“Why?”

“Because he does not believe it will corrupt him,” Severus says softly. “Because he *knows*, unlike anyone I have ever met, that magic is truly amoral. Because I could explain the addictive nature of power, not of magic.” Severus stares at Lupin’s rigid posture. “You are unhappy.”

“I have concerns,” Lupin says tightly.

“That’s your right.”

Lupin sets down his wineglass on the table and folds his arms and Severus knows that if he has any hope of taking the man to bed at some point before returning to Hogwarts, there is an argument to be endured first.

“Harry has already shown that he is susceptible in some way to the lure of compulsions -,”

“Everyone is susceptible to the lure of compulsions -,”

“I understand the analogy of muggle drugs, Severus, I have heard you use it before and whilst it is valuable I also understand that someone who has tasted the lure of an opiate is more likely to seek it out in the future -,”

“You believe that he cannot control himself?”

“I do believe that,” Lupin says sharply. “I don’t believe that Harry would ever have compelled Draco if he was fully in control of himself.”

“Is anyone fully in control of themselves?” Severus mutters, thinking of some of his youthful moments. The word *mudblood* spat out on the air, impossible to recall.

“I am. You are,” Lupin says flatly and Severus remembers what Lupin said about being a werewolf: *werewolves cannot be aggressive.* “All beings with extreme power *must* be in control of themselves, always -,”

“He is a child, he is learning -,”

“I *know* that Harry is only a child but that is why I am concerned!” Lupin exclaims, eyes flashing. “He is already struggling with self-control -,”

“He is struggling, yes, but he is also *learning* and this is how he learns to control himself -,”

“Will you teach him the cruciatus curse?” Lupin demands. “The Killing curse?”

“No,” Severus says emphatically.

“Why not?”

Severus stares at Lupin for a moment. There are secrets Severus must keep on Harrison’s behalf, he holds the secrets of the Princes and of his son, the Mage and friend of Death who walks through this reality and the next. Severus will guard them with his life, even from this man who he might love. *Negahbane raaz*. Still, in this, he decides to tell the truth even if he cannot tell the truth entirely.

“Because Harrison has no need of them,” Severus swallows a sip of wine, hoping it makes the words come out easier. “I told you he does not need a wand, just as you predicted -,”

“Yes, but you didn’t say that he could -,”

“He cast a *crucio* on Bellatrix without saying the words,” Severus says. “She said he did. He says he didn’t even think the words of the spell, just that he wanted her to suffer. I believe that he can take life in that way too. Or he will be able to. One day.”

Soon.

Lupin stares at Severus for a long moment and, for a millisecond, Severus wishes that he could open his own mind to Lupin and reveal to him the way that Harrison learned two weeks ago. The speed of his cast, the power in his hands, the terror and wonder in Severus’ heart in training his son, his only son, how to defend himself and watching him excel.

“It was ... electric,” Severus swallows and looks down into his glass of wine. “He is not an innately talented duellist, for no one can be -,”

“He is a physical learner, it should be something that comes naturally to him,” Lupin says.

“Oh, it is,” Severus can’t help but smile to himself when he thinks of Harrison’s watchful green eyes following his wand movements across the living room of his quarters. “He didn’t realise it, but he ... unconsciously began to mirror my body movements without being asked.”

“Yes, he does that,” Lupin smiles fondly. Severus can see why Lupin prioritised practical examples when teaching thirteen-year-old Harrison to cast the patronus charm.

“He is imbued with magical sensitivity and a distinct talent for physical movement,” Severus goes on. “He used to fly beautifully -,”

“Severus,” Lupin widens his eyes and grins. “Excuse me?”

“Even I can admit that,” Severus rolls his eyes, trying to ignore the prickling blush in his cheeks as he tries to find words to answer Lupin’s questions as truthfully as he can. “But it all makes him such an *exceptionally* quick study, he only needed to discern his parseltongue words before he could cast the spells, he only needed to understand *himself* and the power was in his fingertips, inside him, without the need for a conduit, he *withdrew* the shield wordlessly with his own power in the classroom, it was ... *majestic* and all I can do is ...” Severus sighs and drops his head back against the sofa, feeling the grandiose power of his own inadequacy when faced with a fledgling Mage. “Teach him.”

Lupin sighs heavily and sits down on the edge of the coffee table.

“This is why you taught him the *protego diabolica*, ” Lupin says softly. “You are teaching him how to control this, a spell which is difficult and challenging and dark -,”

“Thought of as dark,” Severus mutters.

“- you’re doing it because you hope it will teach him how to control the magic that we don’t understand, that we can’t possibly match. Aren’t you?”

Severus stares at Lupin. There is tremendous relief in being understood like this, Severus thinks. He has not felt this in a long time. *Not since Regulus*. He nods slowly.

“I cannot teach him to be a Mage,” Severus speaks down into his wine. “I cannot teach him the dangers of pitfalls of his untested power but ...”

“You can teach him how to control that spell,” Lupin reaches across the table and places his hand on Severus’, where it cradles his wine glass. Severus slowly tangles his fingers with Lupin’s, taking a slow breath out.

“Yes,” he says quietly.

“How has he been performing in class?” Lupin asks.

“He has been giving an unexceptional performance,” Severus smirks wryly, thinking of the way that several times a week, his child deliberately outperforms everyone but consistently does not release unexpected spells anymore, only wordless jinxes. “His restraint has been exemplary under the circumstances.”

“He is always exemplary under the circumstances,” Lupin says drily but he squeezes Severus’ hand affectionately. Severus allows himself the smallest of smiles.

“He is not the only one.” Severus looks softly around the room and then allows his gaze to settle on Lupin. On his starched shirt and tweed waistcoat and trousers that Severus wishes to remove, very, very slowly. “You look well here.”

“I am well here,” Lupin looks down at his spread dossiers with a frown. “I think ... we could be well here. In Europe. Here or at Angoulême. All of us.”

It is too much, this soft temptation of a happy life. Severus shakes his head. *Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater*.

“You know I can never come here,” he says hoarsely, hating himself for saying it but knowing he can’t *not* say it. “Not openly.”

“I know.”

“My position -,”

“I know, Severus.” Lupin gives him a sharp, dark look that’s full of a million words and a thousand raw, breathless kisses. “Be here now.”

Severus swallows and nods. He sets his wine glass down and tugs Lupin’s hand gently. He wills his words to be true as he speaks them.

“I am.”

Lupin smiles and allows Severus to pull him around until Lupin is sitting in front of Severus on the coffee table, their knees carefully slotting together.

“Yes you are,” Lupin whispers, his strong hands cupping Severus face, thumbs brushing over the planes of his face as his fingers dig into Severus’ neck. When Lupin kisses him, it’s a delicious relief. It’s been weeks and Severus feels every single one of them in the surge through his body, a unique type of solace that Severus has never felt before, not truly, only since his son and the wolf took up occupation in Skye. Distantly, he struggles to give name to it. *Homecoming*, Severus thinks, dizzily, and then pushes that enticing, dangerous thought down. Instead of thinking, Severus kisses him back, both of his hands clutching Lupin’s knees, urging the wolf towards a type of ferociousness, of grabbing and gripping and biting that never fails to drive Severus delightfully insane and chase his thoughts away.

“Is there a bed chamber?” Severus gasps.

“No, I sleep under the desk,” Lupin rolls his eyes, his voice breathless. “Of course there’s a bed chamber, *cariad*. ”

“Then show me,” Severus demands.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta:@elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website:emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

And Merry Christmas/Happy Chanukah/Happy Holidays/Have a Joyful Solstice!

The Hogshead

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, a visit to the Hogshead
Next time, A visitor in Hogsmeade

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Magnus,

Malfoy keeps threatening me. What can I do?

Thanks for keeping Remus safe

Love,

Harry

My Lord Black,

Very little, unless you are tempted to compel him not to speak to you, which I do not recommend. He can say what he wants, as long as he does not harm you. What are the nature of his threats?

Yours in affection and service,

Magnus Bane,

Steward to the House of Black

Magnus,

But the vow is that he won't raise wands or hands. That's a hell of lot of other things he can raise.

It's weird when you call me Lord Black. It would be like if I called you Lord Dee. So what's up, Lord Dee?

Mostly, he tells me I'll regret the Sanctuary, that he'll find a way to hurt me, blah blah blah. Oh, and the classic ... "When my father hears about this." If I had a fucking pound for every time he's told me that, I could supply Kreacher with jelly beans into the next millennia.

Love,

Harry.

HP,

I see your point. Please, never call me that again. I got chills and it was very unpleasant. It's unclear if Mr Malfoy can harm you by any means as it depends on the nature of the bond when it was made and what was meant by the bonders. Even if you and the second bonders were sure of your intentions, I wouldn't trust your recollections because magic can be terribly finicky like that. I'm afraid we can only determine it through trial and error.

Love,

Magnus

MB,

So this is like a thought experiment. Thought experiment: what happens when a posh wanker git by the name of Malfoy can't curse me or hurt me with his wand? What new tricks will he think up and will they work?

Love you lots and miss you loads,

Harry

HP

Precisely. We shall find out. Keep me abreast of any changes and remember; whilst you cannot use magic to hurt those under your Sanctuary you can always, always defend yourself.

Not in the stars, Harry.

Love and miss you tremendously, Lord Black.

Magnus

— — —

“Master and Heir Nott must wake up,” Kreacher croaks, pulling Theo out of sleep. “It is time for Master to go to his own bed.”

Theo blinks, taking in the gentle blue and gold waves that encase him as he sleeps. Kreacher is prodding Harry’s face with a long finger and a look of smug delight.

“Fuck off, Kreacher,” Harry mutters sleepily. “Fuck off and I’ll give you all the twixes in England.”

Theo sleepily smirks when he sees Kreacher pause, his face working as if he’s trying to decide whether he can hold his Master to an offer made in a half dream.

“All the twixes *and* all the creamy eggs?” Kreacher presses.

“G’way,” Harry tucks his head under the pillow. “Don’t wanna eat eggs.”

“Master promises are false!” Kreacher growls and pokes Harry again.

“No, g’way!” Harry protests and this time, a little gold spark fizzles out of his skin, giving Kreacher a static shock. Kreacher growls again and glares at Harry.

“Master must not fizz Kreacher!” Theo notices that the collected works of Shakespeare are hovering perilously close to Harry’s head. “Wake up Master!”

“I’ll do it,” Theo says, knowing that Kreacher and Harry can descend into full-blown wars involving pillows and books when they are both grumpy in the morning. “Give us twenty minutes.”

“Only twenty,” Kreacher gives Harry another sharp poke in the neck and Harry makes a sound that sounds like a muffled scream of annoyance. Kreacher rolls his eyes and pops away. Theo shuffles closer.

“Wake up, Harry,” Theo whispers, brushing a kiss against Harry’s arm, lips grazing the leather strap holding the basilisk fang in place.

“No,” Harry grumbles. “Don’t want to.”

“Come on,” Theo cajoles gently. Since term started, Harry has been more and more reluctant to get out of bed in the morning. Theo’s just thankful, truly thankful, that he gets to be in it with Harry. “It’s Hogsmeade today.”

It’s the first visit of the year, in the middle of October. Theo feels like it has been so fucking long in coming. The castle has been stifling the life out of them.

“Ugh,” Harry’s voice is muffled.

“The Weasley twins are coming to see you,” Theo says, expecting that to light the same familiar glow of excitement that any letters Hedwig delivers from London usually brings.

“Don’t care,” Harry mumbles.

“Harry.”

“No.”

Theo’s a little surprised. Life has certainly been complicated this year. Harry is still fighting people’s bad opinions everywhere he goes, and on top of that, he has had two more lessons with Dumbledore which makes Harry come to bed at night frustrated and full of questions about the Dark Lord. He rarely sleeps on those nights. Instead, he and Theo lie awake and talk about the corrupted childhood of the most dangerous man in Britain until Theo’s dreams are full of a small, cold, violent child in a terrifying orphanage. Then, during the day, Harry battles constantly to restrain his heir magic, both in class and outside of it, but particularly around Draco who continues to needle Harry so consistently with sly, cruel remarks that Harry has half-moon shaped indents in both of his palms from constantly clenching his fists. Theo privately thinks all of this is why, when they fall into one another’s arms at the end of the day, the bond flows vividly and visibly around them: Harry hates hiding it and the relief of its presence, of falling asleep inside a cocoon on blue and gold light, has been the one thing (apart from his Sundays in apprenticeship to Snape where he can lose himself in the art of Potions) that make Theo feel like he can truly be himself. He’s not surprised that Harry is also feeling the strain of the constant lies and continual observation of others. He is a little surprised that it is interrupting his enjoyment of one of the rare days they can get out of this place.

“Harrison,” Theo tugs the corner of the pillow, seeing Harry’s tousled hair. “Look at me.”

Harry glares at Theo from underneath his pillow, vivid green eyes glowering.

“What’s the matter?” Theo strokes his curls. Harry sighs heavily and closes his eyes. Theo notices the circles around his eyes have deepened since yesterday. Theo was only woken once by Harry’s nightmares and only administered one potion but Theo knows that sometimes Harry doesn’t wake him. He’ll lie awake with Sahara or with Kreacher and read poetry. Right now, Sahara is wound around the left bedpost, curled in on herself like a bundle on a stick. She’s been appearing in bed with them every night, even if she’s sleeping in the Greenhouses or exploring the grounds most of the day. “Did you sleep badly?”

“Yes, I mean, no, I mean,” Harry sighs. “That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just ...” Harry lifts the pillow off his head and punches it before flopping his head onto it. “I don’t want to be him today.”

“Who?”

“Harry Potter-Black,” Harry groans. “He’s a wanker.”

“I’m rather fond of him actually,” Theo smirks.

“You’re a liar,” Harry scowls. “Harry Potter-Black, engaged to Heir fucking Zabini? You are *not* fond of him at all.”

As much perverse joy it gives Theo to hear Harry calling Blaise ‘fucking Zabini’ again, he doesn’t say so. He just tugs one of Harry’s curls, loving how springy it is first thing in the morning.

“I’m sorry, I must be confused about who I’m letting in my bed night after night,” Theo drawls.

“Don’t be a dick.”

“Then get up,” Theo smirks, tugging at the duvet and revealing Harry’s thin frame wrapped in one of Theo’s softest t-shirts and a pair of Gryffindor boxers, adorably matched with a pair of thick, red and gold quidditch socks. His legs are still littered with the small, sharp white scars of Umbridge’s blood quill. Theo knows Professor Snape is still trying to brew something that mitigates blood quill impact. He might be the only brewer in the world doing it. Theo will ask to be part of it.

“I’m not going. Look, can’t we just -,” Harry pulls Theo down beside him. “Can’t we just be us, here? Just hide here all day?”

It’s a tempting notion, especially when Harry is so cuddly and smells so utterly delicious. This is Theo’s favourite version of Harry’s scent; warm and soft and slightly sweaty and yet still, impossibly, carrying that slightly toasted smell of too much magic.

“And who am I hiding with?” Theo asks, amused, as Harry pulls the duvet up completely over their heads and they roll over to face one another, in a warm cocoon on green sheets.

“Harrison,” Harry swallows heavily. “Prince.”

“Harrison Prince,” Theo raises an eyebrow but smiles. He decides to play along. It’s six in the morning. They don’t need to be as cautious about the others in the dormitory stirring too early on the weekend and besides, Kreacher’s Black shields maintain their privacy no matter how much noise they make. “Okay, Harrison Prince. I’m Theo Medeason.”

“What’s that?”

“Medeason - Medea’s Son,” Theo pokes Harry’s nose. “It’s a Norse tradition.”

“It’s nice,” Harry smiles. “Well. Nice to meet you, Medeason.”

“You too. In my bed.”

“I suppose it would be corny to ask if you come here often.”

“Smooth, Po- Prince,” Theo says, catching himself. Harry’s grin widens.

“I try to be,” Harry smirks, shuffling closer, his breath warm and tangy on Theo’s cheeks. “I like your eyes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, they’re silver,” Harry briefly touches Theo’s eyebrow. “It’s hot.”

“Is it?” Theo is instantly caught up in the delight of this, imagining that this kind of blunt compliment would be part of Harry’s natural flirting if they had met in a normal way and were different people. Theo knows he would have loved the abruptness of this and would have found it thoroughly intriguing. “I like your hair.”

“I know.”

“I thought we just met?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry grins. “Then thanks, I guess.”

“What would you ask me?” Theo murmurs, gently pushing his knee between Harry’s. “If we were just ... meeting. At the Yule Ball or something? If you were from Beauxbatons and you were from Durmstrang?”

“Seems unlikely,” Harry snorts. “Beauxbatons is full of gorgeous French-speaking people and Durmstrang’s full of people suspected to be Dark Wizards.”

“Fine, you can be from Durmstrang,” Theo smirks. “What would you ask me?”

“Umm, I dunno, do I speak Russian in this? And French?” Harry grins, clearly enjoying it too.

“Doesn’t matter. Would you ask me to dance?”

“You’ve seen me dance. Er, no, probably not.” Harry snorts. He gently rubs one socked foot up and down Theo’s calf. Theo tries not to shiver. “I might ask you to go for a walk.”

“Oh really?” Theo raises his eyebrows and tries to hide his delight. It’s hard with the bond around them because the blue magic flares and Harry grins knowingly.

“You are really fucking fit,” Harry says. “And I am on holiday. Seems like it could be really ... fun. Walking with you.”

He tucks a piece of Theo’s hair behind his ear. Theo’s stomach flips.

“Well, presuming you didn’t want to just push me up against a tree,” Theo drawls, trying to hide how ecstatic he is with the notion. “What might we talk about? On our ... walk?”

“I think that’s a big presumption,” Harry chuckles and kisses Theo lightly on the lips. “Um... I guess about you, getting to know you ...”

“Get to know me then.”

“Okay,” Harry grins in a way that makes Theo’s heart sing. “Um... what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“A healer,” Theo says promptly, twining his ankles with Harry’s.

“Okay. Why that?”

“My mother is a healer.” Theo doesn’t see why, in this fantasy they are building, his mother can’t be alive. Harry just smiles softly and doesn’t challenge him on it and Theo’s grateful. “You? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“God, I dunno,” Harry grins. “Um ... well, my mum’s a Charms Master but I’m shit at Charms ... My Stepdad’s super into the Falmouth Falcons, so maybe ... a Quidditch player?”

Theo’s not surprised that in this fantasy, James Potter is alive and well, but he is surprised that even in a fantasy, he has not reclaimed his title of father. *Step Dad*. Clearly, Remus Lupin’s impact is too powerful to wish for an alternative father, even in a fantasy.

“Is that true?” Theo asks, too intrigued to keep pretending. “You want to be a Quidditch player?”

Harry’s smile fades slightly.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?” Harry holds up his left hand which still struggles to grip. “And no, not ... not really. I mean, I think I did, when I first came to Hogwarts, Quidditch was *so cool* and Cedric and I -,”

Harry winces and silences himself. Theo curses himself for questioning it because he remembers Harry’s memory of Diggory saying “*Seeker boyfriends, seeker husbands*.” They haven’t spoken any further about that future that Diggory offered, the future that now Harry no longer wants. Theo doesn’t want to talk about it now.

“It’s okay,” Theo kisses Harry’s arm, nudging the fang slightly with his nose to kiss the white puckered flesh that forms the basilisk scar beneath it. Harry sighs heavily.

“I think ... I only wanted to be a Quidditch player because he wanted it,” Harry says very quietly, as if he’s ashamed of it. “I never wanted to be more famous, or to have people watching me all the time, Cedric didn’t mind that. He didn’t care what people said about him.”

“He didn’t endure the same negative press you have,” Theo whispers.

“Yeah. He was ... optimistic. I guess I wanted to be optimistic too, to be close to him so I thought ... if we did the same thing maybe we wouldn’t ... break up.” Harry snorts ironically. “Fat lot of good that did him. And now, because of all that, I don’t think much about the future.”

Because you don't know if you will survive to see it. The thought hurts Theo, but he swallows it down.

"That's normal, I think," Theo whispers. Harry twists his head to look at the duvet above them, the light of the bond glowing blue and gold in the enclosed space.

"When you were little, it's what you wanted, to be a healer?"

Theo nods. Theo sees where the problem is and why Harry looks so sad suddenly.

"Was there ... anything?" He gently takes hold of Harry's hand, imagining the small boy hidden away in Privet Drive, in the cupboard under the stairs. Theo wonders what he dreamt of on those long lonely nights. "For you?"

"I wanted to be magic," Harry swallows. Theo sees that his eyes are glassy. "To have powers. To make it all better. Guess I got my wish."

There's such painful sarcasm in his tone. Theo strokes his face gently.

"The question is - what *do* you want to be when you grow up?" he says softly. "Not what *did* you want. You can be whatever you want, beloved."

Theo loves to call Harry that. He loves how it makes Harry roll his eyes and blush but how the bond bursts with gold light around them when he does.

"I want to be ... not famous. I want to be ... alive. And happy." It breaks Theo's heart that for Harry, these things are not a given and seem almost as unreachable as becoming a famous quidditch star or returning a step-father from the grave. Harry sighs heavily then turns to look at Theo with a quirk of his lip. "I want to be with you. If you're game."

Theo doesn't think he's had a better proposition in his life. It reminds him that when everyone leaves them alone, when they don't have people making comments about the speed of courtships and asking questions about marriage and engagements, Harry is perfectly capable of saying exactly what Theo needs to hear. He kisses Harry's lips, feels a small buzz of magic jumping between them and lets his thoughts flow free and wild through the bond: *I am so game you have no fucking idea.*

"I'll have to think about it," Theo jokes, pulling away from Harry's kiss. "We did only just meet."

"Sure. Give it some time," Harry grins again, running his hands over Theo's bare shoulders. Theo can't stop himself from shivering when he feels tiny, zapping sparks jumping from Harry's fingertips. "I think I'll grow on you."

"Like mould."

"Rude."

"Like fungus. Like death cap mushrooms."

“So fucking rude.”

Harry moves faster than Theo expects, maybe it's magic, but suddenly Harry is on top of him and kissing him until they are both breathless. *I love you*, Theo thinks. *I love you so fucking much*.

“You too,” Harry gasps, brushing his nose against Theo's. Harry hesitates. “Can I say the worst thing?”

“Yes.”

“In the first lesson we had ... I told Dumbledore I would have killed myself last summer,” Harry looks at Theo slowly. “If not for you.”

For a second, Theo feels the same crushing coldness he did at Privet Drive when he realised that Harry had tried to kill himself. *Calm down, he's telling you the truth. He's safe*.

“Why would you tell him that?” Theo strokes Harry's hair, hoping to comfort them both.

“He doesn't like us. You and me. Together.”

“Hmm.” Theo's not surprised but Dumbledore's presumption irks him. “Is it because I'm a Slytherin?”

“I think it's because you're a Nott,” Harry shrugs. Theo thinks for a moment.

“Narcissa mentioned something about ... Grindlewald,” Theo hesitates, the cogs in his mind turning slowly. “Did you know he and Dumbledore were friends?”

“No,” Harry frowns and draws shapes across Theo's bare chest with his fingers. “Do you think that's why he doesn't like us together?”

“Perhaps.” Theo will have to look into it. He imagines that if Narcissa doesn't know, she'll have a clue she can give. “Not that I care particularly what he thinks.”

“Neither do I,” Harry says so fiercely that Theo can't help but kiss him.

“Is it true?” Theo asks, his lips brushing against Harry's. “That last year, you would have -?”

“If he had left me alone like that all summer? Yeah, I think so,” Harry sighs and presses his cheek against Theo's sternum. “I think I would have tried. And today, I just ... I dunno. I feel all of that. How close I was and ... I dunno. I think the worst thing is I sometimes think it wouldn't have been a bad thing for everyone if I had tried, y'know?”

Theo remembers how Harry was that summer. How cold he seemed in the apothecary where they first met. How beguiling he seemed, how unlike everything Theo had expected. How familiar in his cold and uncaring manner, so reckless with his own life. Theo recognises it. There have been times, after all, particularly after the death of his mother, when he too wondered if the world would be better without him in it.

“How are your edges?” Theo strokes the rubber band on Harry’s wrist.

“Sharp,” Harry mutters. Theo’s been asking every day and this is the first time Harry’s answered this way. The edges have been ‘okay,’ ‘a bit shit,’ and ‘crap,’ but this is the first day that Harry’s used the word that Theo knows matters most. *I need to do something.*

“Then let’s go to Hogsmeade,” Theo says, kissing Harry’s curls. “See your guardsmen. Get out of this place for a bit. I think it’ll be good.”

“You reckon?” Harry moans.

“Come on a date with me,” Theo whispers.

“If it’s a date with anyone it’s with Blaise,” Harry rolls his eyes. “He doesn’t like my t-shirt.”

Theo smirks. Harry loves his giant t-shirt that features the muggle musician called Bowie. Blaise has been ordering him couture jackets from Rome which are delightful, but Harry always pairs them with the t-shirt, to Blaise’s continued chagrin. Theo loves it. He even occasionally sleeps in the t-shirt because Harry likes it when it smells like him.

“I’ll buy you a butterbeer, come on, Potter,” Theo squeezes him encouragingly.

“So I’m him again then?” Harry sighs. “Harry Potter-Black’s a fucking riot.”

“Whatever you call yourself, you will always be my beloved,” Theo kisses his forehead. The scar is slightly swollen and sore. Theo makes a note to put some murtlap essence on it before they leave.

“That’s cheesy as fuck, Nott.” Harry blushes deeply but he does, at least, sit up. “Let’s go then.”

They walk to Hogsmeade as a group, bundled up against the wet weather with cloaks and umbrellas and ignoring the stares from the other students who still, after a month and a half of term time, look at their odd collection of Slytherins, Gryffindors and Lovegood as if it is poorly cooked potion about to explode. As always, leading the pack and making sure everyone sees them together, Harry and Blaise walk hand in hand at the front. They are not speaking very much as Granger walks on Harry’s left on Daphne on Blaise’s right and they hold a conversation across them. Theo imagines that’s all Harry can handle right now, as groups of people walk past them all and stare openly at their strange assortment. Theo finds himself walking beside Weasley and Lovegood down the hill, trying not to fix his eyes on Harry and Blaise in too obvious a manner.

“How are his nightmares?” Weasley asks abruptly. Theo looks at Lovegood but she looks entirely nonplussed by the conversation.

“They were better,” Theo says honestly. He and Weasley mostly communicate with insults and jibes except for when they talk about Harry’s health. “But since the first meeting with Dumbledore ...”

Weasley tuts and shakes his head.

“That fucker,” Weasley mutters. He’s wearing a blue cagoule over a hand-knitted jumper and holding Lovegood’s hand. Theo doesn’t quite understand their relationship and Harry and Granger are both tight-lipped on the subject, both respecting and guarding Weasley’s privacy fiercely, but from the outside, Theo thinks Weasley seems the happiest that Theo has ever noticed him. “He always knows how to make Harry feel the worst about himself.”

Theo is surprised, once again, by the similarity in his thinking with Weasley.

“Is he still doing the sleep potions?”

Theo nods.

“We’ve been working on an anti-anxiety medication, like the draught of peace but faster acting,” Theo says quietly. He doesn’t need to mention who he has been working with. “It’s ... proving complicated.”

“Have you tried unicorn hair?” Lovegood says suddenly. She’s wearing bright purple leggings and a matching anorak, hand-painted with flowers.

“Oh yeah, good shout,” Weasley smiles at Lovegood. “Because they’re so calming to be around? That’s a great idea, Lulu.”

Theo raises his eyebrows. He’s never heard of anyone call Lovegood by a tender nickname but her broad smile seems to indicate she likes it.

“What are you talking about?” Theo asks. He did not expect to be getting Potions advice from Lovegood, of all people.

“Have you ever hung out with a unicorn?” Weasley says, sagely. “They’re very ... calm. They have this ... I dunno, attitude that makes everything seem okay.”

“It’s because they don’t have any wrackspurts,” Lovegood says dreamily.

“Or it’s because of their magical properties,” Theo says. “Unicorn hair is used to create balance in potions, I’ve not ever heard of it being a fast-acting agent to lower blood pressure.”

“Maybe do some tests because they definitely do that,” Weasley says firmly. “We’ve hung out with them loads in the forest.”

“You spend time with the unicorns?” Theo raises his eyebrows.

“Luna likes them,” Weasley shrugs.

“And they tolerate you?” Theo questions. Weasley grins.

“A lot of things tolerate me for Luna,” he chuckles. “Just like we tolerate you for Harry.”

“*You* are intolerable,” Theo mutters.

“And you’re an arsehole,” Weasley says easily. “Come on, the twins said we should meet them at the Hogshead.”

Theo is glad that their arranged meeting is in a place where students rarely gather because walking through the centre of Hogsmeade only reminds Theo of how it is not only students who read the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly and see fit to comment on it, it is grown Wixen who live in the village too. They pass a lot of groups of gossiping wixen, staring at Harry and Blaise as if they are a free show.

“Odin,” Theo mutters to himself.

“It’s always like this,” Weasley says sagely. “Honestly, the worst was before the third task when Skeeter’s article came out about him being unbalanced.”

“They’re grown ups,” Theo eyes a group of witches who are giving Harry and Blaise pointed and disapproving stares. “How is it any of their business?”

“People are nosy,” Lovegood says, her voice quiet with hurt. “And cruel.”

It’s a relief to be inside the Hogshead. It’s Theo’s first time in the establishment and he sees little to recommend it aside from the two redheads wearing matching dragon hide jackets and leaning against the bar.

“Milord!” Fred Weasley exclaims, setting down his beer on the bar and pulling Harry into a hug as George Weasley hugs Weasley. “Excellent look, Harry! I think I recognise this tailoring.”

“I bet you fucking do,” Harry rolls his eyes. He capitulated to Blaise in wearing one of the suits he’s had made for him, or at the very least, the dark herringbone jacket and trousers, but Harry has classically paired it with his muggle t-shirt that swamps the trousers like a short dress and his muggle trainers. He’s thrown his dragon hide leather jacket on top. Theo thinks he looks fucking amazing. There’s something about Harry’s effortless beauty that makes his heart stop.

“We’re getting there,” Blaise says.

“You’re getting nowhere,” Harry snaps and jerks his thumb at Fred. “Dress him up instead.”

“I’m open to that,” Fred chuckles. Blaise smiles.

“*Buongiorno*,” Blaise says softly. Theo sees a very familiar longing in Blaise’s eyes. Fred winks at him.

“Milady Greengrass,” George bows before Daphne, who actually smiles at him, before reaching into her bag and withdrawing something.

“As promised,” Daphne says. “Notes on the idea for the suspended twister game.”

“Excellent,” George grins at her in admiration. “You are the sharpest mind in the Sacred Twenty Eight, milady.”

“Tell me something that isn’t obvious,” Daphne rolls her eyes. She looks particularly impeccable today but Theo thinks it has more to do with Granger, who had ditched her usual muggle jeans for a red corduroy skirt and the same boots she wore to the Wizengamot. Theo thinks that there has probably been a quiet conversation about the possibility of both of them treating today as some kind of date.

“This isn’t a good spot for us,” Harry says, looking around the room with a terse expression. Theo knows with one glance that he has seen and heard every sideways look and comment as they passed through the village. “Too exposed.”

“We agree, that’s why Aberforth’s giving us a back room for lunch,” Fred grins, slinging his arm around Harry’s shoulder. “C’mon.”

They’re led into the back room, a room with no windows that outsiders could peer in, only a skylight letting the dim, watery light from outside fall over a round table well stocked with what seems to be wooden boards covered with various savoury pies, fruit and bread.

“Here ye are,” Aberforth grunts. “Bellow if you need anything, Mr Weasley.”

“Will do, Abe,” George says in a friendly tone.

There is profound relief around the room the moment the door closes behind them all. Daphne’s smile widens as she sits beside George and happily begins talking him through her notes, with Granger looking over her shoulder and pointing things out. Weasley sits down beside his brother with a smirk as Lovegood begins to feed a small slice of boiled egg to her ferret (which must have been hiding under her coat). Fred Weasley and Blaise are talking quietly by the door, Fred’s hand running up and down Blaise’s arm affectionately.

“No one’s coming in?” Harry asks. He’s hovering behind the chair next to Theo, tapping a beat on the back of it with the fingers on his right hand. “Not for drinks or anything?”

“Butterbeers are on the table, if you want something different we can go out an order but no one’s coming in, I promise,” Fred says with a flicker of a wink at Harry as he taps the doorknob with his wand and it glows with a locking spell. “Relax, milord.”

“Don’t call me that,” Harry mutters, but he sits heavily down beside Theo and sighs, leaning his head back. Theo is happy to see his shoulders relax.

“Do you want something to eat?” Theo asks gently.

“Not right now,” Harry sighs.

Weasley cuts up a pork pie into quarters and pushes it towards Harry.

“This is good,” Weasley says lightly. “Opal will share.”

“Opal?” Harry looks wearily at his friend. Lovegood sets the ferret on the table and the creature obediently slinks across and down into Harry’s lap. Harry smiles tiredly. “Hey, you. Opal today, huh? Want some pork pie?”

Theo gives Weasley an appreciative nod as Harry begins to nibble the pastry and feed slithers of it to the ferret, stroking her softly.

“Where’s Sahara, Harry?” Luna asks gently.

“She thinks it’s too cold,” Harry says.

“She’s a snake from South Africa, so that makes sense,” Theo says, quietly taking out his knife to slice an apple. He adds it to Harry’s plate without a word. Apples are the thing Harry always seems to be able to eat. Theo thinks this is because there was an apple tree in the park near Privet Drive. He catches Weasley’s eye, who nods approvingly.

“She’s a sissy,” Harry says and then smirks. Theo wonders if he’s talking to Sahara in his mind and if she objects to being characterised in this way.

“She’s taken over the tropical Greenhouse,” Theo says. “Professor Sprout told me she’s doing a good job of eating the mice.”

“Trying to eat here, Nott,” Weasley says, though he doesn’t look like it’s stopping him from munching through a cheese and onion pasty.

“So!” Fred Weasley says, finally joining them at the table, Blaise’s arm wrapped around his shoulders as he leans back. He too suddenly looks happier than he has since term began.

“We’ve got some stuff to talk about.”

“Is this about the skiving snack boxes?” Granger sniffs. “Because I know you’re getting them into school, they keep popping up everywhere -,”

“No, it’s not,” George grins. “This is vault stuff.”

“Where did you hear that?” Weasley demands, glaring at Theo and Blaise and Daphne.

“That’s our thing!”

“We hear everything,” Fred chortles, squeezing Blaise’s hand, who shrugs. Then Fred looks at Harry. “It’s about he-who-is-under-our-Sanctuary.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Harry groans, nibbling on a slice of apple. “Can we not talk about Malfoy? Every time I see him I want to push him down the stairs.”

“But you don’t, which shows remarkable self-control,” Theo says, because he knows Harry’s internal debate is always about self-control. After his conversation with his Sire following their first Defence lesson, Theo knows Harry is trying very hard to make Snape proud. Affirming him is Theo’s way of supporting those efforts and Harry smiles, gratefully.

“Why do we need to talk about Malfoy?” Daphne asks, pouring some butterbeer into a glass for both her and Granger and taking a sip.

“Because he’s up to something,” Granger says, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear and giving Daphne what Theo imagines she thinks is a surreptitiously flirtatious look. Her whole face lights up like a charm. There is nothing surreptitious about it. “Ron and Luna and I have been keeping an eye on him.”

“How?” Daphne frowns.

“We have ... certain resources,” Weasley says, catching his brother's eyes and smirking. Theo knows they are talking about Lupin’s map.

“And the blubbering humdingers,” Lovegood says dreamily.

“What have you noticed?” Fred asks.

“That he’s often in places he shouldn’t be,” Granger says flatly. “Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, the 6th floor corridor - just odd places.”

“Why does this concern us?” Blaise asks with a frown.

“Because he wants to hurt Harry,” George says. “To get back at him about the Sanctuary.”

“Ah,” Blaise’s frown clears. “Yes, that does concern us.”

“Us,” Harry shakes his head bitterly and glances at Weasley. “Remember when no one fucking cared if someone hurt me?”

A flutter of concern rides around the room, Theo sees it in the twinges in eyebrows and tightening of lips but everyone knows that exclamations of dismay over how long Harry has been neglected are absolutely the last thing he wants.

“Yeah, mate, I do,” Weasley hands Harry more grapes and Harry takes them, looking consoled by his friend’s words. “But this is better than having to deal with Quirrelmort on our own, though, right?”

Harry snorts with derisive laughter but nods. Theo strokes his knee, the ferret called Opal sniffing his fingers. Theo tries to press words through the bond between them: *You are not alone*. Harry takes a deep breath and shakes his head.

“Ironically, it was fucking Malfoy who left me alone with Voldemort in the first place,” Harry muses. “In the Forbidden Forest. Saw Quirrelmort going all vampire on a unicorn and legged it.”

“Coward,” Granger sniffs, nibbling some cheese.

“Professor Quirrel drank unicorn blood?” Daphne sounds rightly disgusted. “He deserved to die then.”

“He would have done, likely,” Lovegood says softly. She’s cutting a pork pie into a star-shape. “The consumption of unicorn blood carries a curse.”

“So what has your dear cousin done?” Blaise asks.

“Don’t call him that, it gives me the creeps,” Harry mutters. “I hate how many shitty so-called *cousins* I have.”

“But you call him that,” Blaise smirks.

“To wind the motherfucker up, yeah.”

“Malfoy has made several suspicious purchases from Richard Burke,” George says. “We don’t know what the purpose of the purchases would be but it doesn’t look friendly.”

“Surely you can’t discern from a list of purchases who the intended target of any cursed items would be,” Daphne says. “Assuming there are cursed items on it.”

“There are,” Fred says.

“Still you cannot know if Harry is the target or not,” she continues.

“Seems bloody likely,” Weasley says sagely.

“Yeah, if my track record is anything to go by,” Harry snorts. Fred pulls a list out of his pocket.

“This is all the inventory Burke’s personally sold in the last two weeks.” He sets it on the table. “We don’t know what Malfoy’s bought.”

“Where did you get that?” Granger demands, quickly swallowing a mouthful of cheddar. “Surely those are private records.”

Theo notices how Daphne carefully takes one of Granger’s crackers and delicately places a second slice of cheese and some grape on top of it. He finds himself catching Blaise’s eye and smirking. This mild curating of food seems like the simple politeness of a good pureblood lady, but is something Daphne only does with people she feels strong affection for. It’s as close to a tell as she gets. Theo presumes from this, at least, that she and Granger have come to a mutual understanding about Daphne’s disinterest in dating and Granger’s overt interest in spending more time with Daphne.

“Well, there’s private and then there’s ... quietly accessible,” George grins.

“Gimme,” Harry sighs, gesturing for the list which Fred Weasley casually makes flutter across the table with his wand. Theo looks at the list as it settles down between him and Harry. His stomach drops. *Well, shit.*

“This is ... a bad list, right?” Harry says quietly.

“This is a very bad list,” Theo answers.

“How many items are lethal?” Granger demands.

“We don’t know,” Fred shrugs. “Some of the things we’ve checked through Bill and from Dad’s old records, they’re either historical artefacts with curses or adapted items with curses, but some of them are shrouded in secrets. We’ve marked the items in red we don’t know about.”

“These all are lethal,” Theo taps a few of the red items.

“How do you know?” Granger demands.

“Apollonius was a collector,” Theo says shortly. He looks at the items on the list - *The mirror of Mrytle’s Plantation, the anguished man painting, the skull of Burton Agnes Hall* - and imagines what Apollonius would have paid for some of these. “Which is why I can tell you that most of these are not items that would simply be sitting around Burke’s store.”

“Let me see,” Blaise takes the list and examines it. “Theo’s right. No doubt Burke would be paid a retainer to hunt rare items. Draco would not know to ask for many items on this list.”

“Maybe he’s really motivated,” Harry mutters. “He can be creative when he wants to be.”

“Maybe he doesn’t need to be,” Theo says. “There are other collectors with money. Minister Malfoy for example. He collects.”

“Yeah, Veela,” Harry grumbles.

“We don’t know how many, if any, were ordered by Malfoy or ordered by his father. We only know that he was in the store the day before you all came back to school,” George continues.

“And you don’t know when different items were delivered or anything?” Weasley asks, frowning. “That way, we could work out which ones Burke got a hold of for after Malfoy’s visit.”

“No,” Fred shakes his head. “Our source isn’t that detailed.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t find it out though,” George grins.

“How?” Granger looks at them shrewdly. George taps the side of his nose.

“I don’t know anything about the hand of glory,” Blaise frowns down at the list.

“Not deadly,” Harry says. “Gives light only to the beholder.”

“Handy,” Weasley nudges Fred. “Get it?”

“Nice,” Fred grins, giving his brother a high five.

“I don’t know the final three either,” Theo says as the list is passed to Daphne.

“The coronet carries a beauty spell,” Daphne says quietly. “The hat pin has a compulsion. The necklace of Harmony is unknown to me.”

“It could be the Opals of Eriphyle,” Luna says dreamily. “From the story of Harmonia’s necklace.”

“Yes, that is a myth,” Theo says quietly. “So unlikely.”

“I thought you said myths come alive around me,” Harry hisses parseltongue into his mind. Theo pinches Harry under the table and ignores his smug look.

“Not sure what Malfoy plans to do with a hat pin,” Weasley frowns as the list makes it to him and Lovegood. “What, would he stab you with it?”

“He can’t stab Harry,” Theo says. “He cannot raise wand nor hand to him under Sanctuary.”

“He’s so unhappy with it he might risk it,” Harry mutters.

“Are we going to speak about the nature of this Sanctuary that Draco has that he has clearly not consented to?” Daphne says, her voice tight.

“What are you asking?” Weasley says lightly but his eyes are guarded. Daphne gives Harry a long look.

“Did you force him under your Sanctuary?” She asks. “Compel him?”

“Of course he didn’t,” Granger says, sounding appalled. Theo keeps his expression studiously calm. Only he and Harry know about the compulsion and Harry already feels terrible about it.

“No,” Harry says flatly. It’s true, after all, or at least a half-truth. Harry only compelled Draco not to speak of it.

“We’re not going to talk about the Sanctuary,” Fred says sharply. “That’s Black family business.”

“And clearly Harry just did something insane,” Weasley snorts.

“Fuck off,” Harry mutters, rolling his eyes with a smirk.

“So what’s our plan?” Blaise asks.

“We’ll try and work out from our end what Malfoy bought on this list,” George says. “At this end, Ron and Hermione will keep up surveillance and you and Daphne and Nott need to keep a close eye in Slytherin, just to see if any unusual artefacts show up.”

“Understood,” Theo says, glancing at Harry. He can tell that Harry needs the conversation to move on. “Shall we eat now?”

“So,” George Weasley reaches for a pie. “How much do the Chudley Canons suck this season?”

Theo watches as Harry smiles at Weasley's predictable response of utter outrage, followed immediately by pieces of cheese flying around the table in a minor food fight. Theo gently places a protective arm around Harry's shoulder and feels him relax, just a little, into Theo's embrace.

"Hungry?" Theo asks quietly.

"For you, always," Harry says softly with a smirk, but then his smile fades as he looks down at his place. "For this, not so much."

Theo pushes aside his sudden urge to kiss Harry in front of everyone. Even though they are all wixen, even though they are safe, he has never forgotten his promise on the M1 never to 'out' Harry, and Harry is obviously still twitchy about public displays of affection.

"How about we share something?" Theo says, trying to find a compromise and distract himself from staring at Harry's lips. He reaches for a treacle tart and cuts Harry a slither. He quickly takes a bite from the end and then offers it to Harry. "Want some?"

Harry grins and leans forward to take a small bite, his eyes alight with mischief.

"Pretty good," he smirks. "Not the best tasting treacle thing in my life but close enough."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Harry grins, and leans forward to kiss Theo quickly on the lips. "Yum."

Theo tries not to look too nonplussed, he glances around the others and notices a few stares, a few happy, indulgent looks and Granger looks a bit teary. Theo realises what this is. For the first time since Diggory, Harry's friends have just witnessed him kiss another person. The same could be said, Theo supposes of his friends too, since Daphne and Blaise have only ever seen him be affectionate with Daphne or Blaise. Theo has the sudden, strange feeling of approval from the group, of other people taking joy or giving encouragement to his relationship. He decides it is not entirely unpleasant. Harry, however, is happily oblivious and leans down to bite some more pie.

"Hey, I thought we were sharing," Theo protests and Harry laughs as Theo leans forward and kisses away the crumbs from his cheek. Theo revels in Harry's delight. After all, Theo is determined that today, they will both have a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: @elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website: emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

A Hogsmeade Surprise

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Hogsmeade is very busy
Next time, Harry's made a mistake.

WARNING - WARNING - WARNING

Eager reader beans, this chapter ends on a CLIFFHANGER and I am taking a week off. So if you are cliffhanger sensitive, I recommend waiting until the update on the 10th of January. If you want further info in the meantime, check out the latest post on my insta. Details in end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry's tired. Everything about today is tiring him and not even having lunch with everyone quietly and privately has made it any better. All he wants today is to be back in bed with Theo, out of the rain and away from the stares of Hogsmeade.

"You okay?" Theo asks as they all pull on their jackets after lunch, preparing to walk back into town. Harry wants to lie for a second, to pull on a fake smile and grin playfully at the boy he loves, but he can't. He promised he wouldn't. He shakes his head. Theo looks a little crestfallen, after all, he's done a great job of cheering Harry up and sharing slices of pork pie together and Harry really doesn't want to disappoint him, but he quickly recovers, squeezing Harry's hand tightly and leaning in to kiss his cheek.

"You tried. Well done." Theo whispers in his ear. "We'll go back to bed."

"We better," Harry smirks, feeling consoled at the prospect of a quiet, secret afternoon in a warm safe space with Theo. The thought buoys him as they leave the Hogshead, ignoring the stares and glares of the various patrons, and he has to take Blaise's warm hand to walk in the rain in the view of all Hogsmeade.

"Your fingers are chilly," Blaise says as they follow Fred, George, Ron and Luna down the path. Daphne and Theo and Hermione are walking behind them. "Are you alright?"

Harry notices how Blaise's eyes are fixed on the back of Fred's head. Harry wonders suddenly what it would be like if Fred could walk hand in hand with Blaise and Harry could stroll with Theo and everyone else in the universe could go to hell. But the secrets he keeps are heavy on his skin, they actually feel heavy today, as if the magical bonds that surround

him, his friendships, his familial bonds, his consort-shield bond, his bonds to the children and guardsmen of the house of Black, as if all of them apart from the fidelity bond are chafing him.

You are bound in many ways, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind. *It is a gift.*

Doesn't feel like it, Harry thinks back.

Your bonds are not bondage, they are safety.

Harry sighs heavily. He doesn't always understand everything Sahara says but he recognises this. It's what Theo said to him when Harry first realised that Theo knew about the bond before he accepted it. Harry gives Blaise a sideways glance, feels the heaviness of his secrets, and decides he might as well test them by being honest with his Consort Shield. Besides, Harry is too fucking miserable right now to lie.

"I'm always cold these days," Harry says. "Since the cage and Bellatrix cutting me up, having hypothermia or whatever, I dunno. I feel the cold more."

Harry and Blaise have never talked about Bellatrix and the torture and what came after. Blaise doesn't even seem to notice but Harry feels a tiny flex in the grip of Blaise's hand, as if he has heard the words and instantly, wanted to make sure Harry is not going anywhere. For some reason, this tiny tell of concern in an utterly imperturbable visage touches Harry's heart and he blushes, looking down at his trainers.

"Hmm. It's interesting because usually, you are hot to the touch," Blaise says neutrally and then shoots him a sideways glance. "Will you allow me to warm you up?"

"I'm not really a hugger, Blaise."

"I wouldn't dare," Blaise grins. He lifts their joined hands, Harry's Black diamond glinting against Blaise's carnelian ring. Harry's getting more and more familiar with other people than Theo holding his left hand. "Can I?"

"Okay," Harry says warily. Blaise's eyes flash redder for a second and an orange glow fills their hands. It's like dipping his hand into warm water. Harry grins, remembering the way the Contessa easily lit the fire with her Zabini ring on their first meeting. The Zabini magic must have an affinity with fire. He tastes almonds and bitter herbs. The warmth creeps up Harry's arm. "Hey, this is actually nice."

"The Zabini magic does not only restrain, it encourages." Blaise gives him a flicker of a wink and Harry rolls his eyes.

"You kinky bastard," Harry mutters.

"Such compliments from my intended," Blaise smirks.

"I didn't *intend* to compliment you."

"Then you are smoother than you thought, aren't you?"

Harry can't help but throw back his head and laugh. Blaise is a fucking pain in the arse so often but he's also hilarious and that makes him a good friend so often. Blaise's smile fades slightly and he lowers his voice.

"I hope you know, my Lord, that Bellatrix LeStrange will not run free forever," Blaise says quietly. "If we continue as we have, you will have the weight of my family behind you when you decide to pursue her."

Harry swallows and looks down at his hand, mutilated by Bellatrix LeStrange. He appreciates that Blaise doesn't think it's weird that he wants to pursue Bellatrix, that he feels a burden of Lordship to the house of Black that includes bringing Bellatrix to account for what she did to Arthur.

"I doubt I'll need it," Harry says, equally quietly, "but if I do, your family will have to get in line behind eight Weasleys."

"Well, I've rather enjoyed being behind a Weasley."

"You idiot," Harry shoves Blaise playfully and he smiles, carefully sidestepping a puddle in his Italian loafers. "Thank you, anyway."

"Of course, my Lord," Blaise grins.

"Fucking Merlin's balls!" Ron exclaims, stopping in his tracks in front of them as he stares at the side of Zonko's joke shop. "Is that - is that *Malfoy* snogging Tremblay?"

It is. They all stare.

"It's like watching the Knight Bus crash," George says. "I can't take my eyes off it."

"I have always wondered who was responsible for Draco's etiquette lessons," Daphne says, catching up to them. "For surely, they are an abysmal teacher and should be struck off the register."

"Well, Tremblay's not much better," Blaise's voice is cold. "See, Harry? They are fucking. You were right."

"Is that a win?" Harry grimaces. "This doesn't feel like a win."

"Not for anyone," Theo mutters behind them.

"Well, I see no reason to stare at this any longer," Hermione says, primly.

"Not unless you're wanting to practise your memory charm later," Ron says.

"No thanks," Harry shakes his head and starts to move away but George stops him, his magic strong and vibrant, smelling fresh and sharp around him.

"We have business with Tremblay," Fred says and raises his voice down towards the couple squirming against the brickwork. "Oy! Tremblay!"

Malfoy pulls away from Tremblay. Harry's utterly baffled by the way both of them look at him and Blaise with some kind of victory and viciousness. Malfoy's flushed face is turned to Harry in a sneer of superiority and Tremblay's dark eyes are fixed on Blaise, completely ignoring Fred's yell.

"Zabini," he sneers, eyes resting on Harry and Blaise's held hands with a kind of fierce anger and desire that Harry doesn't immediately understand. "I see you still haven't come to your senses."

"I am happy with my choice of partner," Blaise says. Harry's jaw drops.

"What? Oh my god," Harry blurts out as he whips around to stare at Blaise. "Does he *fancy* you?"

"Seems like he does," Fred says, his voice light but deadly.

"What it seems like is Zabini doesn't have the good sense to know a flattering offer when he sees one," Tremblay sneers. He doesn't seem to notice that Fred is slowly putting his hand into his pocket and withdrawing his wand.

"Your offer was considered and rejected, Cornelius, I think that showed every measure of sense," Blaise says calmly.

"He offered *courtship* to you?" Harry stares at Blaise's very deliberately neutral face in amazement. "Why didn't you say?"

"Because offered is not the right word," Daphne says quietly.

"Deigned to offer is better," Tremblay drawls. "For the son of a *Creature* -Queen."

"Tried to force the issue is more like it," Theo mutters. Harry swears he sees Fred's hands clench slowly into fists. Harry can't imagine anyone trying to force Blaise to do anything and suddenly, the consort shield bond across his back feels fiery.

"Really?" Harry can't help the flash of anger that fills him up on Blaise's behalf. "That's nearly the worst thing you've done, Tremblay. Are you collecting shitty things?"

Tremblay glares at him and Malfoy seems furious at Harry for defending Blaise, though Harry can't work out why.

"Fuck you, Potter," Malfoy snarls. Harry hadn't even meant it that way but he supposes it doesn't hurt to imply Malfoy's a shit now and again.

"I'm surprised you can even speak, Potter-Black," Tremblay says quietly, his eyes fixed uncomfortably on Harry's throat and the scar there. "Though I suppose Aunt Bellatrix must have wanted to leave you with something."

"Well, this makes everything a lot easier," Fred says, stepping closer to Tremblay with George beside him. "We've got a bone to pick with you, Tremblay."

“More than one,” George says.

“I’ve nothing to say to you, Weasley and Weasley,” Tremblay sneers.

“Oh, did you miss the memo?” Fred says coldly, pointing at his brother. “He’s Heir Black.”

“And he’s a Guardsman to the House of Black,” George points back at Fred. “I think we have some Black *family business* to attend to.”

Harry sees Malfoy flinch at George’s words. He wonders what George put in the letter he sent to Malfoy after the Wizengamot. It’s definitely had the right impact. Tremblay’s face discolours quickly but he fights to maintain his composure.

“Then let us attend to it,” Tremblay says, stepping away from Malfoy. “I’ll dual you both.”

“That’s not how we work,” Fred says quietly. “You’ll hear from us. No one hands our Lord over to Bellatrix Lestrange without consequence.”

“He did WHAT?” Ron and Hermione exclaim in unison. Oddly, that makes Tremblay flinch, but it might just be because Hermione’s voice is ascending to a very high pitch.

“He’s the one who told? He’s the one who took Kreacher and -,”

“You absolute FUCKFACE!” Ron bellows.

“No,” Luna immediately turns and wraps herself entirely around him in a full-body hug.

“You shit, you’re a *terrible* person -,” Hermione is going on but Daphne tugs her hand to pull her away from Tremblay.

“Come away, Granger,” she says in a low voice. Harry shoots Theo a look and he follows, as if he knows that Harry is worried Hermione might launch herself at Tremblay, which Harry knows would be a really awful turn of events. *But Tremblay probably wouldn’t survive, so that’s a benefit.*

“Not just Weasleys forming a line,” Blaise mutters to Harry. “Your sister too.”

“It’s a long bloody line,” Harry mutters back, thinking of Severus.

“This is typical of you, Potter-Black,” Tremblay sneers. “Getting other people to do your dirty work.”

“Isn’t that what you got your Auntie to do?” Harry snaps back, clenching his fists. He doesn’t like thinking about the moment he realised Kreacher had been compelled. “When you told her to compel my elf?”

“You gave me this!” Tremblay snarls, pulling down his collar to reveal the red line of the goblin axe. “You *scarred* me for life!”

“Are you fucking kidding?” Harry bursts into wild laughter. “You want to compare scars? She gave me this!”

Harry holds up his mutilated middle finger. He swears he can feel Theo smirking.

“You want a bigger scar, Tremblay? I’ll rearrange your fucking face!” Ron yells, but Luna just calmly clambers onto his back and tugs his hair.

“Stop it, Ronald,” she says gently. Ron goes puce with the effort of holding in his yells.

“Leave it to us, Ron,” George steps closer to Tremblay and presses his wand tip into Tremblay’s chest. Tremblay just looks at him in amusement and Malfoy snorts and rolls his eyes where he is leaning against the wall. Harry knows that they’ve both made a huge mistake: like so many others, they have underestimated George Weasley. The ever so slightly quieter twin, the more studious of the two, they have mistakenly thought George Weasley has not an ounce of violence in him. Harry knows differently and so does Tremblay, when he looks down and realises that George is singeing his robes.

“Get off, Weasley,” Tremblay snarls.

“No. Do you know that with consistent heat and pressure, I could burn a whole with my wand tip right through your heart?” George’s quiet and insistent voice makes Tremblay’s eyes widen slightly. “So a little singed fabric is the least of your worries.”

“If you want to duel, duel,” Tremblay snarls.

“I’m sure we will,” George smiles very gently. It’s a bit horrifying. “So until we meet again when you’re wearing your pretty little white mask, keep our Lord’s name out of your filthy fucking mouth, you Death Eater scum.”

“And leave him intended alone,” Fred adds. Harry feels Blaise’s hand tense inside his. *He’s worried Fred will give something away.*

“Guardsmen of the House of Black,” Harry says. Both George and Fred turn to look at him. George’s aniseed-tasting magic is thick in the air and Fred’s eyes are sparkling a little too brightly, black flecks of the Black magic in his irises. Harry looks down at his diamond and hisses at it: “*Settle down.*”

Immediately, both twins nod and fall back to flank Harry. Blaise is gripping Harry’s hand quite tightly, much tighter than he usually grips Harry’s left hand because Blaise is usually so aware of Harry’s tremors and scars. Harry knows why: *He wants to get Fred away from Tremblay.*

“See?” Tremblay snorts, clearly finding his voice now that George is no longer pushing him up against a wall with a wand on fire. “Nothing but your lapdogs, Potter-Black!”

Harry ignores him. Calming Blaise’s anxiety is his main concern.

“Walk with us, Guardsman,” Harry says to Fred and then feels Blaise’s relief in the bond when Fred falls into step beside them.

“You’re pathetic,” Tremblay jeers. “Walking away!”

“Why is he even here?” Harry mutters. He does not enjoy seeing Tremblay again. He just remembers Bellatrix talking about her godson whilst the poison pushed its way through his blood.

“Aside from acquainting himself with Draco’s tonsils, he’s probably joining Rosier in his recruitment drive,” Blaise says. Fred doesn’t comment. He seems to be clenching and unclenching his fists in his pockets whilst George walks silently on Harry’s other side with what Harry thinks of as his ‘plotting’ expression on his face. Harry doesn’t say anything, instead glancing over his shoulders to see Theo deep in conversation with Daphne, who is holding Hermione’s hand pretty tightly, as if she’s worried Hermione might rush back and curse Tremblay. Luna is still on Ron’s back, but now he’s just giving her a merry piggyback ride. Harry smiles and waves at Luna, whose ferret is riding on Ron’s head.

“You didn’t mention it,” Fred says lightly. He’s staring straight ahead with his red brows furrowed. “About Tremblay.”

Harry knows that comment is directed at Blaise. Harry catches George’s eye for a moment and then they both look down at their feet.

“It was not worth mentioning.” Blaise’s voice is also light, but very clipped.

“Then it will not be worth mentioning when I curse his face off,” Fred mutters. “He tried to *force* you to -?”

“He was insistent but that does not make him successful,” Blaise cuts Fred off.

“For obvious reasons,” Harry says, holding up their held hands that are still slightly glowing with the orange of Blaise’s heir magic. Fred gives them both a lopsided grin.

“I suppose that is kind of obvious,” Fred gives Blaise a very fond, slightly frustrated look.

“Although I have to say, watching you threaten Cornelius was the highlight of my day,” Blaise grins with some of his normal panaché. He looks at George, who shrugs. “It was very well done.”

“Glad to do it,” Fred says, giving Blaise a flicker of a wink before giving Harry a reassuring look.

“We’ll take care of Tremblay, milord,” George says quietly. Harry nods.

“Don’t murder him,” Harry says.

“Is that the only instruction?” Blaise raises his eyebrows. “Don’t you think that’s a little lacking in prescription?”

“Nah, I’m flexible,” Harry grins at Fred. “Surprise me.”

“Will do,” Fred’s eyes take on the hunting quality of a Weasley getting ready for a fight. Harry knows it well.

“You’ll like it,” George says darkly.

“This, right here,” Blaise gestures between them with a smirk. “*This* is why people think you are the next Dark Lord.”

“Speaking of Dark Lords,” George says quietly. “Isn’t that Hilary Lee with Rosier?”

Harry looks to where George is nodding at the window of Scrivenshafts. Hilary Lee is standing there, her dark braids sparkling with the light rain and a worried expression on her face as Rosier leans against the glass and looks down at her. *The possible future heir to the House of Rowle, if Rosier and Voldemort have anything to do with it.*

“Shit,” Harry mutters. “What should I do?”

“Let her know there’s another option,” Theo says. He’s suddenly on Harry’s other side and is fixing Rosier with a significant stare. Harry wonders exactly what Theo and Rosier got up to when they met as children. Theo hasn’t wanted to talk about it, which seems fair to Harry since Rosier’s such a dick.

“Okay,” Harry nods at Fred and George and jerks his head at Daphne, who has caught up, Hermione looking angry and flushed but less likely to curse Tremblay’s face off. “Just us Slytherins then.”

“Oh, us Slytherins is it?” Ron grins at him. “When it suits you, hey?”

“Piss off,” Harry rolls his eyes at him and the four of them, Blaise, Harry, Theo and Daphne, move closer towards Hilary Lee and Rosier.

“Hey, Lee!” Harry shouts.

“Always discreet,” Daphne mutters. Hilary Lee looks around at them and he’s gratified to see a slight flicker of relief on her face.

“Hello, Potter-Black,” she says.

“You alright?” Harry lets his eyes dart to Rosier, who is leaning against the glass with his arms folded and a calm smile on his face.

“Fine,” Hilary whispers. Harry doesn’t believe her.

“Wanna come to the Three Broomsticks with us?” Harry asks, jerking his head towards the pub.

“Go ahead, Hilary,” Rosier says, nodding encouragingly. “We’ve said all we need to say, haven’t we?”

His entire manner is incredibly polite. It's quite unsettling. Harry's not sure he's ever met a truly polite Death Eater, but maybe it's just hard to be polite to Harry when Voldemort's trying to kill him all the time.

"Yes," Lee nods, her eyes wide as she gratefully moves over to stand next to Daphne, who puts a hand protectively on her shoulder. Harry looks at Rosier, expecting some kind of loud rebuke or nasty insult like Tremblay, but Rosier only smiles benignly back. That's when Harry knows what kind of Death Eater Rosier is. He's not like Tremblay and Malfoy who both bluster and try to face off against Harry whenever they can, who spout about the 'Dark Lord' like they know him. Rosier isn't interested in causing drama or making waves, he's got his eyes on the prize. Harry's met a Death Eater like Rosier before. Barty Crouch Junior had Harry in his sights all year and never once made a move, not until the very end when the plan had truly gone awry. Harry knows better than to underestimate a Death Eater who is willing to play the long game. Rosier smirks softly, as if he's reading Harry's mind, and pushes himself off the glass to stroll past them.

"Enjoy your day, cousin. Lee, Zabini, Greengrass," Rosier inclines his head at them all and then smirks at Theo. "Theodore."

"Felix," Theo mutters. Rosier's face doesn't change and the two stare at one another, stuck, it seems to Harry, in this strange reminder that they once had a shared childhood, before Rosier gives Theo a wintry smile and walks casually away, very poised. For a horrible split second, Harry uncomfortably imagines what kind of Death Eater Theo would have been. Rosier might be the closest to it.

"Thank you," Lee smiles weakly at Harry and gratefully shakes him out of his thoughts.

"Anytime, Lee," Harry says.

"Call me Hilary," she says.

"Okay," Harry suddenly feels very awkward. "Look, you know, if they, like, pressure you about shit, like stuff to do with heirships and that, we're ... I dunno, we're around."

"Okay," Hilary looks in confusion at Daphne.

"Utterly useless," Daphne mutters behind him.

"What my intended means by that is that if you ever need to discuss what kind of protection could be open to you as an alternate to the offerings of Heir Rosier, we are certainly open to those discussions," Blaise says smoothly. Hilary's confusion is wiped away and relief floods her face.

"Thank you," she looks earnestly at Harry. "Sometimes I don't know why I sorted Slytherin, everyone's so bloody mean about my Auntie and Uncle, but you're different. All of you."

"To be Slytherin is not to be anything except all you wish to be," Daphne says, her eyes kind. "Let no one tell you otherwise."

“Okay,” Hilary nods firmly and shoots Blaise a slightly bashful look, her cheeks colouring. “So could ... I know my Aunt’s a muggle but she’s an MP and she does know about politics and things, so could she write to you?”

“I am always delighted to receive correspondence from Members of Parliament,” Blaise says, so politely and regally that Harry snorts and shakes his head.

“He’s met Princess Di,” Harry whispers to Hilary. Her eyes widen. “I know. Fucking mental.”

“Harry,” George calls behind them. “If you’re done politicking we’ve got a surprise for you.”

They all turn around to see the rest of their group hanging around by the small wishing well in the centre of town. It’s pretty clear they’ve been watching the whole show and, from the way Fred and Ron seem to be exchanging coins, maybe placing bets of some kind. Hermione looks irritated which Harry knows means she lost.

“I’m really not in the mood for a surprise,” Harry says as they all move to rejoin. Harry tries not to think about how all the students coming and going around them fix their eyes on the odd combination of Slytherins and Gryffindors who, from the outside, everyone thinks are only held together by the unlikely courtship of Blaise and Harry. “What with Malfoy sticking his tongue down Tremblay’s throat -,”

“Ew,” Ron looks queasy.

“And another cousin who wants to kill me -,”

“Do you have any that don’t?” Hermione mutters.

“- I’m sort of done.”

Harry is more than done. Harry wants to surrender to the fact that this is a shit day and climb into bed with Theo and possibly, not get out until Wednesday.

“Well, this is a good surprise,” Fred grins.

“That does not bode well,” Harry sighs, jerking his head towards Ron. “I remember the story about the teddy-bear spider.”

“You whiny bastard!” Fred exclaims to his brother.

“You’re the ones who did it!” Ron yells back.

“Yeah, I’m not in the mood for a giant spider,” Harry winces. “I mean, *another* giant spider.”

“It’s not a giant spider.”

“That means it’s something worse!”

“That is exceptionally rude, Mr Potter,” a familiar and laughing voice says behind him. “I’m inclined to take offence.”

Harry spins around. Magnus is standing behind him, clearly having just slipped out of Scrivenshafts. He’s wearing his lime green leather jacket and some kind of glitter in his hair and such a familiar, comforting smile that for a second, Harry forgets how much he hates being out of bed.

“Magnus!”

Harry doesn’t know if he flies or apparates or maybe Magnus moves him but suddenly he’s hugging Magnus close and breathing in his scent of Frankincense and rosewater.

“Hello, little Mage,” Magnus chuckles, hugging him close. “All well?”

“Nope,” Harry shakes his head and snorts. “Terrible.”

“Hmm, I thought as much from your letters,” Magnus grins, pulling back and pushing Harry’s hair from his face. The magic in his hands feels warm, like standing in a sunbeam and Harry feels better. “Come on, let’s get a drink.”

“Okay,” Harry grins at the others, letting Magnus link arms with him. “We’ll be in the Three Broomsticks.”

“We’re going to Scrivenshafts,” Blaise says, looking at Theo who nods. He’s just as stoic and quiet as always but there is a softening around his eyes that tells Harry he’s really happy that Magnus is here and Harry is so happy to see him.

“We’re going up to the forest behind the shrieking shack to look for ...?” Ron looks at Luna.

“Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,” Luna says.

“Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,” Ron repeats, nodding firmly. Harry smiles happily. He loves that Ron, who once upon a time cared a lot about when other people thought he was weird or poor or different, now doesn’t care at all.

“We’ve got a meeting in Zonko’s,” George says, gesturing to the joke shop. He nudges Daphne. “Coming?”

“We’re going to have a drink, actually,” Daphne says quietly, linking her arm with Hermione’s.

“Oh?” Harry grins at Hermione, the reason why she wore her favourite skirt today abundantly clear. “A drink is it, Mi?”

“A drink, is it?” Ron adds, elbowing her in the ribs.

“With Daphne?” Harry goes on.

“With Greengrass, is it?” Ron echoes.

“Alright, yes, stop you two,” Hermione blushes. Ron and Harry grin at one another. They know better than to use the word ‘date’ because it’s not what Daphne’s looking for, but Hermione has been sighing and staring at the back of Daphne’s shiny dark hair for *weeks*. This is a very good development. Hermione turns to little Lee. “Come on, Lee, I’m sure some of your friends are inside.”

“And a cocktail, one hopes!” Magnus says.

“God, yes,” Harry says.

“You are *sixteen*, ” Hermione slaps his arm and glares at Magnus. “Don’t forget it.”

“Wouldn’t dare, heir Potter,” Magnus grins and Hermione rolls her eyes, holding the door of the Three Broomsticks open for Daphne. Harry is too happy to notice the way all of the students in the pub turn and stare when he follows the others inside. He merrily says goodbye to Hilary and Daphne and Hermione and settles down in the same far corner of the pub where he once overheard Fudge talking about Sirius.

“So,” Magnus says, setting down a Butterbeer for Harry and what looks like a whisky-based cocktail for himself. “Daphne and Hermione? That’s definitely happening?”

“Seems to be,” Harry grins at where Daphne and Hermione have found a table and are sitting close together under the pretence of reading a book together but Harry notices the way Hermione’s eyes keep sliding from the page up to Daphne’s face.

“How do things fare with Mr Malfoy?”

“Shit, that whole castle is a shit show,” Harry snorts, reaching over to take a sip of Magnus’ cocktail. The whisky is sharp and peaty but there’s something sweet and honeyed in it too. “That’s nice, you should get Kreacher to make that for you.”

“Rosmerta’s secret,” Magnus smiles and then gives Harry a long, considering look. “You seem unhappy, HP.”

“I’m not unhappy,” Harry shrugs.

“But you are not happy,” Magnus presses.

“How could I be?” Harry scowls into his drink. “Everyone’s talking about me or staring at me or cursing me and Slughorn’s making it so much worse with all this ‘golden couple’ shit.”

“Hmm, yes, being the subject of everyone’s attention can be irritating,” Magnus sighs. “When I was a child, I was the one everyone talked about too.”

“I bet,” Harry smiles at Magnus’ golden, cat-like eyes. “You never told me how you were made.”

“Because it is ... hardly savoury.”

“I don’t care,” Harry shrugs. “Everyone’s chatting about me being a Necromancer after the Witch Weekly article, it’s not like that’s savoury.”

Since the Witch Weekly article, the interest from the Italian newspapers has reignited and the articles that Lucius Malfoy spent so much time squashing at the beginning of the term have found their way to Hogwarts. On top of that, Harry knows that every student who has a parent who works in the Ministry has been told what happened in Rome and now all of those students have told everyone in their dormitory. It’s how gossip works, Harry gets it, but it doesn’t make it any easier to swallow when he hears people whispering that he’s the next Dark Lord.

“Very well,” Magnus smiles and sips his drink slowly. “My father developed a practice that utilised the *Avada Kedavra* curse.”

“What?” Harry stares blankly.

“When someone casts the *Avada Kedavra*, a little part of their soul is pulled away,” Magnus says. “There are cursed practises that utilise this for the gain of more life and more power, but my father thought that, in the careful collection of such things, he could potentially create a living being.”

Harry stares. Whatever he expected, it wasn’t this.

“So he ... patchworked your soul together?” Harry feels queasy. “From murdering people? It’s ... wow. That’s like Frankenstein or something.”

“I won’t tell you who dropped the idea on Byron before their famous getaway then,” Magnus says, his eyes twinkling.

“Frankenstein is about *you*?”

“Of course not,” Magnus waves his hand. “A drop of inspiration only, it’s not my fault what Mary, in all her young genius, decided to create or what pillow talk George decided to divulge.”

“Wait, you shagged Lord Byron?” Harry shakes his head. “No, that’s not surprising, I mean, your Dad literally *killed* people to make you?”

“That was the initial experiment, but the creatures created from the experiments did not live long.”

“Why?” Harry asks.

“Tainted,” Magnus sips his drink. *I bet they fucking were*, Harry thinks bleakly.

“So how did they make you?”

“My father had necromantic gifts too, Harry, just like you,” Magnus says softly.

“Necromancers are different. They do not need to use the killing curse to take a life.”

“So he used Necromancy to kill?” Harry lowers his voice to a whisper. “Like I did with the Obscurus?”

“I am not sure,” Magnus muses quietly. “My father did not have your friendship with our Lady beyond the veil but he did have more of an awareness of his own soul than others. He found that he could intentionally carve away a part of it, without malice or murder, and use his soul slither as a basis to create life.”

“That sounds crazy,” Harry says. He imagines what it would take to carve a soul. For some reason, he thinks of the golden song deep inside him that guided him back from the far green country on the floor of Grimmauld Place. How would it feel to cut part of that away?

“It was. It was fantasy,” Magnus’ eyes are suddenly bleak. “But it worked. He carved and rather than that part of his soul going to Death, he captured it and made use of it. There was a spell, I think, that came from the strangest of places.”

“Where?”

“Your stepfather’s family, no less,” Magnus smiles. “The much-storied Potter Grimoire. He was ... acquainted with one of James Potter’s ancestors for a short while.”

“So ... your Dad shagged one of my stepdad’s great great great great grandads or something?” Harry stares. “Wow, now we really are like brothers.”

Magnus bursts into laughter and clinks his glass against Harry’s.

“Something like that.”

Harry takes a long sip of butterbeer thoughtfully.

“So it’s in the Potter Grimoire? How you were made?”

“No, just the should carving process,” Magnus smiles. “The rest is a secret that died with my father.”

“Huh,” Harry stares at Magnus. “So ... you’re made from his soul? You have your Dad’s soul?”

“Souls are not only what we are born with, the life we live makes them too,” Magnus grins. “The longer I live, the more I am my own.”

“To long life then, I guess,” Harry says, lifting his butterbeer. “And since it’s us, it’s *really* long.”

“Indeed, it can be,” Magnus smiles and they clink glasses. Harry remembers Magnus’ words at Spinner’s End: *there are things worth living a long time for*. For Magnus, a soul completely his own might be one. For some reason, whilst the thought of his own immortality scares him, this thought is nicer. “I must say, I am so glad to hear you say that.”

“Why?”

“Because perhaps you are coming to anticipate a possibility where Mr Riddle doesn’t prevail,” Magnus’ eyes twinkle with amusement. “And when you do that, and we live our lives long, we can consider what fun awaits us.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever heard of the Great Comet of 1843?” Harry shakes his head. “I saw it carve its way across the sky in Tasmania. Its orbital period is supposed to be around 600 years. I’d like to see it again, with a friend.”

“So we have a date to watch a comet together in about 450 years?” Harry smirks at Magnus. “You’re such a planner.”

“If the world tarries,” Magnus shrugs playfully. “You can never discount the possibility that the world might end all on its own.”

“You mean without me ending it?” Harry says sarcastically.

“At least wait until after the comet,” Magnus winks.

Harry smiles widely and feels comforted. This is what he’s been missing, been craving, something that no one in Hogwarts can provide him. He loves Theo and he loves Hermione and Ron, but they can’t wrap their heads around the idea he could live forever. Harry can’t do it either but he needs to be around someone who can. Magnus isn’t phased, not even slightly. With everyone talking all the time about how strange and dangerous he is, it’s nice to be with someone with whom he’s mostly normal.

“Will do,” Harry chuckles, stealing another sip of Magnus’ drink as Hermione appears at their table. He quickly tries to hide it behind his back, blurting out: “I wasn’t drinking.”

“Subtle,” Magnus laughs, reaching around Harry to retrieve his drink.

“I don’t care,” Hermione says breathlessly. “Can we go?”

“Did something happen?” Magnus frowns.

“I need to find Nott or Zabini,” Hermione glances behind her. “I think Greengrass ... well, I’m worried that she’s having a kind of shut down again. She’s not talking to me.”

Harry looks over her shoulder and sees Daphne standing by the door looking very still and odd.

“Oh. Yeah, sure, let’s find him,” Harry stands and takes a long sip of his butterbeer then looks at Magnus. “Walk me back to school later?”

“I’ll finish this and be with you,” Magnus grins. Harry nods and follows Hermione back towards the door. As they approach, Daphne abruptly turns and walks out of the pub.

“What the -?” Harry mutters.

“Greengrass?” Hermione calls, jogging to catch up with her.

“Daphne, can you hear us?” Harry calls as they jostle some first years out of the doorway. Outside, the rain has turned to a persistent rainy drizzle. Through it, Harry sees Theo and Blaise walking out of Scrivenshaft’s.

“Greengrass wait -,” Hermione tries to stop Daphne, who seems determined to march straight back up to Hogwarts.

“Blaise!” Harry calls, getting a few turned heads as people nearby whisper about the notion of a Gryffindor calling a Slytherin by his first name, even when they’re supposedly engaged. Theo and Blaise quickly join them. “Hermione thinks there’s something wrong with Daphne, like, she’s overwhelmed or something -,”

“Daphne?” Theo frowns.

“She’s got something under her coat,” Hermione calls back to them. She’s gripping Daphne’s arms, holding her in place. “She won’t - she’s not speaking and she won’t -,”

“What?” Theo moves forward, pushing his Scrivenshaft packages on Blaise. “Granger, don’t force her to do anything, she doesn’t like to be touched -,”

Harry sees a brown package falls out of Daphne’s coat and onto the floor between Hermione and Daphne.

“Hermione, be careful!” He calls. He watches the paper slide open. Something shining and glowing falls out in the snow.

“Don’t touch it!” Theo yells, throwing out a hand to stop Harry from moving forward before quickly pulling it away. “The stamp on the package, Granger!”

Harry hopes no one has noticed. As they hurry to catch them up, Harry sees the symbol, the double B in calligraphy. *Borgin and Burkes*.

“I wasn’t going to!” Hermione steps back, arms raised. Her eyes widen. “Oh my god, It’s the necklace! The opal necklace we didn’t know anything about!”

“*Santa Diana*, Draco moved fast,” Blaise mutters.

“Telling me,” Harry snorts, shoving a second year out of the way, his eyes fixed on Daphne and Hermione. With horror, he watches as Daphne stares down and the necklace with a nasty blank expression that is still filled with intention.

“Daph, Daph, *tesoro mio!*” Blaise and Theo and Harry try to navigate a swarm of third years streaming out of Honeydukes. “Just leave it -,”

But Daphne is bending down and Harry feels several things in quick succession. Something doesn’t feel right to him, when he looks at Daphne, he can’t smell her magic in the same way. It’s no longer bright and zesty, the smell is obscured by something, something thick and sluggish and Harry realises that someone has power over Daphne, just like they had power

over Kreacher in Grimmauld Place. Harry doesn't know what to do but he knows he has to stop it. Harry reaches for the place inside him that is outraged that someone has done this to her, the Slytherin magic that is full of liquid rage and burning because Daphne belongs to *him*, he keeps her secrets and she has a vow with him and the magic is roaring at him that he must protect, he must command, he must *control*.

“Stop, Daphne!” The Slytherin magic is venom and fire and leaks into his voice, full of compulsion. “Stop moving! Don't speak, don't move!” He looks into her brown eyes and doesn't hold any of the magic back, parseltongue slipping from his lips: “*I command you to stop!*”

Chapter End Notes

Next update will be Tuesday the 10th of January.

Draco's Mistake

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS NOTE:

There are three chapters this week. They are intense. If you can't cope with 24 hours between chapters, please WAIT until Thursday to read all three chapters. Also this story is about trauma in every direction. These three chapters are about trauma. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags this week and if you are sensitive to any of the TW's in the tags, please read the endnote FIRST.

This time, Draco makes a mistake.

Next time, Severus and Harry have a necessary conversation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Daphne stops where she is, bent over.

Oh fuck. It worked. Harry hears Theo's sharp intake of breath and sees Hermione's eyes widen. He feels like everyone is moving around him.

"What the fuck?" Blaise hisses, rushing forward to stand in front of Daphne, shielding her from view. Oddly, Theo suddenly shoves Harry's hand down, as if he has his wand in it and was pointing it at Daphne, which he wasn't. In the touch, Harry feels Theo's thoughts pushing urgently against his: *Put your wand in your hand.* Harry obeys, completely nonplussed and watches as Theo runs to stand on the other side of Daphne, so she is completely hidden from view. Harry doesn't really understand, then he hears the mutters around him, sees Blaise and Theo and Hermione all shooting glances at the students moving around them. Then Harry starts to hear the whispers.

"Did you see that?"

"I think Potter-Black cursed someone in parseltongue!"

"Did you see who it was?"

"No, did you?"

Oh shit. Harry realises exactly what he's done wrong and why Theo asked him to draw his wand. They need to hope against hope that no one realised he was doing magic without it but Harry doesn't have time to think about that now. He ignores the passing stares and the whispers and shoulders his way through the gaping third years to join the others. He's glad, suddenly, that Daphne hadn't made it to the middle of the square, she's sort of caught in the gap between the post office and the house next door, on the edge of the alley. With Theo and

Hermione and Blaise blocking the view, none of the others can see her. *I was lucky*, Harry realises.

“What were you thinking?” Hermione demands as soon as he arrives, sliding as his trainers hit a puddle.

“She’s - I dunno - she’s under the imperius curse or something,” Harry gabbles, starting to worry that he’s actually done something really, really stupid. He watches as Theo and Blaise carefully lift Daphne, moving her further into the alley. She is horribly stiff, like a mannequin in a muggle shop and Harry sees the outrage in her eyes that her friends are having to handle her this way. “I don’t know how to stop that so I just thought -,”

“You thought you’d compel her?” Hermione hisses, tears in her eyes. “Harry!”

“She needed to stop moving!” Harry yells. “It’s - it’s cursed! It’s Malfoy - you know - the list!”

“Let’s keep our voices down,” Blaise says sharply.

“I know, Harry, but you can’t just *compel* people!” Hermione's voice rises but then falls on the words she needs to conceal. “It’s *illegal*, Harry! It’s like - it’s like *drugging* someone in the muggle world!”

No one has ever explained it like this to Harry. Severus has explained it to him, and so has Remus and Magus and even Theo and Narcissa, but no one has ever used this simple muggle analogy to drive it home to him and suddenly, Harry feels sick with both Hermione’s dismay and his own shame.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I’ve really screwed up this time.

“But she - she’s under a curse, the necklace could hurt her -,” Harry tries to say desperately.

“Harry,” Theo whispers. “She’s wearing gloves.”

Harry stares at Daphne’s hands. She *is* wearing gloves. He either didn’t see or didn’t notice.

“So?” He demands, but his stomach suddenly feels horrible, and he doesn’t think it’s lunch.

“Magical objects like this only have a terrible impact when touched with raw skin,” Blaise says. There’s no attack in his voice, but his eyes are redder than normal. “We could have restrained her ourselves.”

“There was no time ...,” Harry whispers weakly, but the terrified look in Daphne’s eye tells him that there could have been if he had just thought to ask the others for help. Harry stares helplessly at Daphne. She is as stiff as a board, bent over and trembling, unable to move. Tears are rolling down her cheeks and Harry’s stomach cramps with the horrible shameful pain of having hurt her.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione’s eyes are filling with tears. “I know you were trying to help but I wish you had just *thought* -,”

“Harry?”

Harry is utterly relieved to hear Magnus’ voice behind him. He turns around and Magnus is standing close by. His quick, gold eyes flicker over them.

“What’s going on?”

“Cursed,” Harry points to the necklace, swallowing hard. “I - I just made her stop but - but there’s something else, the imperius curse or a potion making her *want* to touch it -,”

Magnus nods and squeezes Harry’s shoulder. He moves closer to Daphne, putting a hand comfortingly on Hermione’s arm. She is sniffing and staring at Daphne who is holding her gaze with teary eyes.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” Magnus says softly. He flicks his fingers and a silvery shadow emerges, soaring away through the air. Harry thinks it might be a Patronus but he isn’t sure. Magnus unwinds the patterned purple scarf from around his neck and drops it carefully over the opal necklace. Then he looks into Daphne’s eyes. He mutters a phrase under his breath and then waves his fingers across Daphne’s eyes, blue dust flickering over them. Daphne blinks several times. Harry’s relieved to see some kind of familiarity returning to her gaze.

“Hello, Miss Greengrass,” Magnus says quietly. “We’ve not met but I’m Magnus Bane, steward of the House of Black. Can you tell me if you are still possessed of any urge to touch or carry the necklace?”

Daphne shakes her head.

“Very good,” Magnus smiles and turns to Harry. “Come here, my Lord.”

Harry hesitantly walks closer, grateful when Theo and Hermione stand behind them, blocking the alley from outside view. Daphne looks at him with such agonising despair and fury that Harry almost flinches.

“Can you feel the compulsion inside you?” Magnus asks quietly.

“I - no, not ... not like before with ... with Draco,” he swallows hard and sees Daphne’s eyes flash with betrayal and he knows that she’s going to be mad that he lied. Maybe more mad than she is about this.

“Then it is because it is a command-based compulsion, not an ongoing compulsion,” Magnus says softly. “So you need to find the thread of it inside you so you can break it.”

“I ... I don’t know how to do that. I didn’t know, I just wanted her to stop moving, I didn’t think ...” Harry is too ashamed to look at Daphne as he says this. He’s done this thing and he doesn’t know how to undo it. Daphne will never accept that.

“Yes, you do,” Blaise says, his voice sharper than usual. “When you pulled on my vow in Rome, it’s like that. A command. Find it inside yourself.”

Harry doesn't dare look behind him at Theo, even though part of him is desperate to do so. They can't stand close so he can't even feel Theo's words through the bond. Harry feels nastily alone, suddenly.

"Okay," Harry closes his eyes and breathes, listening and sensing the magic around him. He finds Daphne, the hints of fresh ginger on the air and then, what Harry thinks must be the taste of his compulsion. This time it doesn't taste as rotten but it is astringent, like tar, thick and clogging. "Found it."

"Good," he feels Magnus' hand on his shoulder, his warm, comforting presence that is filled, Harry just knows, with a sense of understanding. Magnus knows better than anyone how powerful Harry's urge to compel those around him is. "Now pull the compulsion back inside you."

Harry remembers how he did this with the poison in Grimmauld Place. He takes a deep breath and imagines the compulsion like a thick, soggy rope that he pulls back into himself, feeling the heaviness of it coiling inside of him like a sickly pile of mush. It tastes horrible. If Hermione's right and compelling people is liking drugging them then this is really nasty-tasting drug.

I really shouldn't have done this.

There is a gasp and Harry opens his eyes to see Blaise stepping forward as Daphne crumples into his arms. Magnus quickly pulls leather gloves out of his pocket and pulls them on, wrapping the opal necklace up in his scarf and casting a quick spell on it. Harry stares at Daphne as she turns her head to stare at him but all words fail him entirely. Harry finds himself thinking things to her instead, wondering if she can still feel the horrible connection between them made of control, wanting to fill it with regret. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

"Magnus!" They all turn to see Bill running into the alley, clad in leather. Harry's relieved to see him. "Everything okay?"

"Not really. Miss Greengrass, unfortunately, fell into possession of this," Magnus hovers the necklace wrapped in a scarf between them. "I am not entirely certain but I think they may be the opals of Eriphyle."

"Odin," Theo mutters. "Lovegood was right."

He throws Harry a glance and Harry knows exactly what he's thinking: *myths really do come to life around you*. Today, it doesn't feel like a joke or a compliment. It feels like a curse.

"Merlin," Bill breathes, cautiously moving the magically wrapped bundle into his arms. He looks at Daphne. "Miss Greengrass, how did this come into your possession?"

"I don't remember," Daphne whispered. "I was in the bathroom and ... then I don't remember anything else, not until I reached for it." Her eyes dart to Harry and he tries not to blush.

"We think it was Malfoy," Harry blurts out.

"We can't prove it," Hermione whispers behind him. "It's just a list, it doesn't have any names, Fred told us -,"

"Did he?" Bill mutters and Harry can see that the twins are going to be getting a visit from their big brother later today. Bill looks at Magnus. "What do you think happened?"

"I can't speak to the providence of the necklace but I believe she was under the imperius curse," Magnus says smoothly. "Miss Greengrass, do you remember anything about your orders regarding the package? Who gave it to you or what they said?"

Harry holds his breath and notices Theo is doing the same. If Daphne remembers Draco giving it to her then they have him.

"No," Daphne shakes her head. Harry fights back his disappointment. *He's got away with it.* "I don't even remember leaving the pub with Granger."

"She wasn't saying anything, not really," Hermione says, her voice wobbling behind Harry, but Harry can't bear to look at her either. He's terrified of the rejection he might see in her face. "She kept saying she needed to get back to the castle."

"Right, well, we can assume that if the package was targeted for someone, they're up there," Bill says darkly.

"Will you ensure that goes somewhere else?" Magnus asks lightly, gesturing to the bundle of the necklace. "I'm sure Albus would be interested."

"Given that the necklace is of Greek origin, I think the Contessa. It shouldn't even be in possession of a British wixen, it breaks the European Artefact Accord," Bill says grimly.

"Could I get in trouble?" Daphne whispers. "For carrying it?"

"No, not if there are witnesses to you being under the Imperius curse, the Contessa will be satisfied with your lack of consent," Bill says, smiling at her comfortingly and then his eyes rove to Harry. "I'll update Lupin."

Harry nods dumbly. *Lack of consent.* The words feel like barbs in his throat and he can't speak.

"Please tell the Contessa that Daphne was put under the imperius curse," Blaise says, stroking her hair.

"Of course," Bill nods. "I'll alert the Aurors. They'll need to come and do a few scans of the area. Your father will probably be told, Miss Greengrass."

Daphne doesn't say anything but nods her head against Blaise's chest. Harry can only imagine how angry a father like Daphne's will be to hear his daughter has been put under an unforgiveable curse. *Imagine how much he'll hate me if he finds out what I did.* Harry swallows and cannot look at anyone around him. He knows he's safe, he knows that they'll protect him and can feel the tension of his vows in his body. He feels slimy at the thought of what he did, as if everyone is looking at him and seeing a criminal. It's exactly how it felt

after he killed Quirrell or after he compelled Malfoy. The same thought rushes through his head: *No one will want me after this.*

“Thank you, Bill, that will help,” Magnus says, squeezing Bill’s hand briefly before turning to Daphne. “Miss Greengrass, I recommend you head up to the castle and have a rest.”

“I can take her,” Hermione says, but Daphne continues to press her face into Blaise’s chest. He’s never seen her look so publicly vulnerable. Harry knows he has to say something.

“Daphne, I’m -,”

“Don’t,” Daphne’s voice is quiet but harsh as she clings to Blaise, her eyes sharp. “Liar.”

“Daphne,” Theo says quietly.

“You didn’t even know how to undo it, you didn’t even know what it *meant* to do it, you didn’t even *try* to stop me by another means,” Daphne whispers, her eyes full of pain as she holds Harry’s gaze. “You did that to me and you didn’t even *know*.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispers. Daphne shakes her head.

“Get away from me,” she whispers.

Harry immediately turns and walks away. He knows Theo can’t follow him, can’t be seen doing this in public and he knows Blaise won’t. Not right now. Not with Daphne feeling how she’s feeling. Besides, Harry is nearly a hundred percent sure he’s about to be sick and he doesn’t need an audience for that.

“Harry,” Magnus squeezes his shoulder, catching him up.

“I’m fine,” Harry shrugs Magnus off. “I just - I feel a bit -,”

Magnus nods knowingly.

“Go around the back of the pub,” Magnus says.. “No one will see you. I have to go to Venice and give my testimony to the Contessa, but I’ll write.”

Harry obeys with a curt nod. He walks quickly around the back of the pub, his trainers sliding on the wet grass until he can place a hand against the stone wall and throw up into the back drain. His head lurches and he knows that, no matter how much he throws up, he won’t be able to throw up the feeling inside him of the heavy, sickly, coiled rope inside his belly.

Fucking compulsions, I’m such an idiot -

When it’s over and he stops retching, Harry sighs and leans back against the pub wall, lifting his face to the rain. For a second, he feels the wondrous relief that follows being sick, the clear moment of calmness and wellness, and then the heaviness from Daphne’s compulsion returns as does the guilt, crashing over him like horrible waves. *I fucked up, I fucked up so badly.*

He opens his mouth to let some drops of rain fall in, hoping it helps him feel a bit better. It doesn't. He wants Theo but he can't have Theo, he can't *risk* Theo right now and he just compelled (*drugged, it's like muggle drugging*) his friend, the girl that his best friend in the world, his own sister fancies. Harry's always been lucky in the past, he realises, that when he's done illegal shit it's usually been to people who are dicks to him, violent people, nasty people, people who tried to hurt him, and generally, whilst some people disapprove no one has told him off for it that much. Not really. No one told him off for killing Quirrell, or Tom Riddle's shade, or for freeing Sirius or riding Buckbeak or using a time turner or even, really, for compelling the goblin King and Bill and Malfoy. Certainly, no one has ever looked at him the way Daphne just did, like he betrayed her by doing this illegal thing without asking her or trying another option first.

Why didn't you? Sahara whispers inside his mind.

Harry thinks about it, about the moment he had realised Daphne was compelled, how the magic inside him had surged in defence. Why didn't he shout out to Hermione or Blaise? They were right there, he could have shouted at them that Daphne was compelled but he didn't. *Why didn't I ask them to help?* He looks down at his fingers, at the hidden rings.

You trust magic more than humans, Sahara whispers.

Harry realises that she's right. Maybe, he trusts the voice of Sahara and the intentions of the magic inside him more than any living person.

I didn't trust them to help her, Harry realises miserably. *And I hurt her.*

Yet you tried to help her.

That comment makes Harry's stomach clench painfully because he only knows one person who hurts people and says it's for their own good, and Harry doesn't want to be anything like him. *Fucking Dumbledore.*

"Fuck," Harry groans, thumping his head repeatedly back against the wall until he sees stars behind his closed eyes. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck -*,"

"You look like shit, Potter."

Harry sighs and opens his eyes. Malfoy is standing in front of him, hands in his pockets, eyes gleaming with something that almost looks like triumph. He must have been watching, Harry imagines he wanted to follow Daphne back to the castle at a distance to see if she did what he'd made her do, but Harry can't prove any of that and he feels very, very sick still.

"Fuck off, Malfoy," he mutters. He can't deal with this right now. *Even if he might be trying to kill me with necklaces.*

"No, don't think I will," Malfoy sneers. "They know now, don't they?"

"Know what?" Harry groans.

“That you’re just like *him*, aren’t you? You pretend that you’re above everyone else, that you have Zabini and Nott and Greengrass all wrapped around your little finger, but now they know what you can do to people, how you *compel* people, you’re just like the Dark Lord -,”

“Oh shut up,” Harry mutters. He might be feeling awful over how he’s done something just like Dumbledore, but he knows for a *fact* Tom has never compelled anyone with the intention to *save* them from another compulsion. “You have this shit plan to throw some necklace at me and you used Daphne and now you’re pissed I stopped you -,”

“You assume everything’s about you, Potter,” Malfoy sneers.

“So it’s not about me,” Harry smirks, unable to stop the pieces falling into place behind his eyes. Years of solving stupid mysteries have made some things natural and this is one of them. *Malfoy did give Daphne the package but it wasn’t for me.* “Who else are you sending gifts to, Malfoy? Can’t imagine that necklace would look good on Tremblay.”

“You think my business is your business?” Malfoy’s voice is sharp, eyes oddly bright. “You think my *relationship* is your business?”

“I think you’re under my Sanctuary and if you’re fucking shit up I’m going to deal with it because, yeah, it *is* my fucking business,” Harry says, equally sharply. “*Cousin.*”

“Cousin,” Malfoy jeers softly. “You can’t stop the Dark Lord.”

“Oh yeah, blah blah, very scary,” Harry mumbles. “Whatever, Malfoy, I can stop *you* at least.”

“Stop me? Then fucking stop me.” Harry opens his eyes to see Malfoy crowding in on his space.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Harry presses his hands flat against the wall behind him.

“I’m getting you to stop me,” Malfoy’s eyes are bright and his cheeks flushed. “Stop me, use your fucking compulsions, curse me -,”

“I’m not going to curse you,” Harry can only imagine what Severus would say if he did and he has no intention of compelling anyone ever again. “You’re under my Sanctuary -,”

“And I don’t want to be,” Draco snarls, and suddenly he is *Draco* and Harry is struggling to think of him any other way because the rotten remnants of the compulsion pulses between them and Harry feels dizzy. He wants to throw up again but Draco is caging him in. “So curse me. I’m going to make you curse me.”

“Oh, you’re going to fucking make me? Seriously?” Harry rolls his eyes. Harry tries not to feel everything he feels, the itch in his skin and the steady feeling of being trapped that reminds him of so many other times like this. *Dudley and the taser. Voldemort in the graveyard. Umbridge and the blood quill. Bellatrix and the cage. Petunia, always fucking Petunia.* “Why? Learn some fun tricks from your Auntie? Because unless you did, there’s no fucking way I’m going to curse you.”

“Oh, yes you are,” Draco says (*Malfoy! Malfoy not Draco, no*). “You’re going to curse me and I’m going to be free of this shit -,”

“Stop being such a whiny wanker and get the fuck out of the way,” Harry tries to push Draco back, determined not to let any magic out of his fingers, but Draco has his hands on his shoulders and pushes Harry back against the wall. Harry expects him to step back, hissing with burns on his hands, but he doesn’t. Then Harry realises why. The pressure in Draco’s hands is not violent. It’s intentional, but it’s not violent. There’s a particular look on his face and Harry feels his stomach drop. *Oh, fuck no.*

“Make me, Potter,” Malfoy whispers. He presses a hand over Harry’s throat, over his rune mark, horribly and intentionally gently and then surges forward.

Draco kisses Harry.

Harry stiffens against it and wants to stop it, but he doesn’t know how to do anything anymore.

(Petunia’s holding his head under the water in the bath, Dudley has the taser against his hip, and Bellatrix’s teeth rip through his skin.)

He can’t move because Draco smells and tastes so much like his father’s magic and Harry can’t breathe through it but then it doesn’t matter. Draco shoves his tongue into Harry’s mouth and presses his solid insistent body against Harry’s and the blood magic roars through his mind, dragging Draco’s memories with it. Even if Harry doesn’t want it, there’s nothing he can do.

“So it’s you, is it?”

Draco is staring down on him on the first day on the Hogwarts Express, taking in Harry’s tiny frame, his broken glasses, his extremely baggy clothes and his leafy green eyes. Draco’s remembering his father’s command: Seek the boy out. Take him under your wing. For our family, Draco.

Draco is racing Harry around the Quidditch pitch, hating him and loving every second of it. He thinks that finally, he can beat Harry and then everyone will know that the Malfoys are on the rise. That they don’t carry the stain of the Dark Lord’s name, that they are beyond it, especially if they can beat the famous Harry Potter. Harry feels the roaring jubilation in Draco’s blood that finally, Draco has found someone he can use to show just how worthy Draco really is.

Draco is glaring at Harry as he dances at the Yule Ball, hating him for his success, for his prominence, for being the boy that everyone is looking at all over again whilst Draco still stands in the shadows. Harry feels Draco’s resentment bubbling up, resentment and also, horribly, an angry kind of desire.

“Stop staring,” Goyle mutters beside him. “People will think you have a thing for him.”

“You fucked your way to first place?” Draco yells across the Great Hall, full of derision and fury as he looks down at the photo of Diggory kissing Potter on the front page of the Daily Prophet. He was a beautiful boy. Draco had thought about him, had dreamed about him, before the Dark Lord’s return had even talked to his father about how Heir Diggory could have made a promising match for their family. But Potter had him. Of course, Potter has everything. Harry feels Draco’s confusing indignation, sickening itself with its own desire.

Potter is wearing his new face and glaring at Draco as he compels him. Draco’s tongue is thick and sluggish and he realises with horrible terror that he can’t deny the boy in front of him, can’t yell and bluster and fight with him as he always has. Harry feels the sudden drop of panic inside Draco’s blood, the despair that the Potter in front of him has changed into something Draco doesn’t understand. Draco’s nemesis, the person he has always intended to overcome to prove his worth, has surpassed him. Now Draco is inside Harry’s power rather than conquering him and Draco feels nothing but howling, impotent rage.

Draco is being held against the wall by Cornelius and thinking about Potter’s stupid tattoos and indignant green eyes. Harry sees Draco’s triumphant expression when he realises Harry is there, staring at him. Harry hears the words inside Draco’s angry mind:

Yes, I’m with the person who sold you out. Hate me. Notice me, you bastard.

“HARRY!”

Harry hears the yell, he thinks it could be Theo. Maybe Theo’s felt his pain, his despair, his complete, overwhelming sickness at having Draco so close and tasting Draco’s fucking memories. *Draco’s memories of me.* Harry knows, in a bleary millisecond, that he cannot curse Draco but if he doesn’t get Draco away from him right now, Theo will definitely kill him. *You can always defend yourself,* Magnus’ words float back to him. Oddly, Harry thinks of Dudley. So he slams his forehead directly into Draco’s nose.

“You fucking - fucking muggle!” Draco yells, releasing Harry and suddenly, he can move. Something in him that has been holding its breath, still as a dead rabbit, wakes back up.

“What the fuck is happening?” Blaise yells, and Harry sees blearily through stars spinning in front of his eyes that Blaise is very deliberately standing in front of Theo, one hand holding him back whilst his wand fixes on Draco. Harry stumbles against Draco as he turns back towards Harry, spitting blood from a bleeding nose, his wand out, and Harry throws a punch into Draco’s stomach, sending him sprawling across the floor.

“I won’t curse you, Malfoy,” Harry gasps, the world still spinning, but utterly determined that even if he can’t seem to able to call Draco by his last name in his mind anymore, he will *never* call Draco by his first name to his face. “But I will beat the *shit* out of you if you do that again.”

“You will curse me,” Draco spits, leering up at Harry from the damp grass. “You will because otherwise, I’ll tell everyone you liked it.”

“You know why, right?” Dudley sneers. “Because you like it. You’re a sick little pervert.”

There’s magic inside Harry that could open dimensions but he fights to constrain it, trembling with the force of keeping it under the skin. *Narcissa asked me to protect him. Severus asked me to protect him. I won’t curse him.* He knows that if he even *thinks* about magic he will hurt Draco with it, but he does kick Draco firmly in the ribs, determinedly keeping his mind blank. He will not think about compulsions, he will not think about killing people or the nothing place,, he will not think anything at all. *I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care -*

“You fucker -,” Harry pants, kicking him again, barely aware of who he is talking to. Inside his mind, he sees Dudley’s sneering face. *You liked it.* “You utter wanker, Malfoy, you won’t ever fucking *touch* me again -,”

“STOP!”

Someone is pulling Harry back from Draco and Harry sees an undeniable black cloak and a pair of furious eyes. *Severus.* For a small second, Harry is relieved, just purely relieved that Severus is there with the scent of his magic so familiar and comforting, but then he sees the absolute outrage on Severus’ face and knows he is in a world of trouble.

“What on *earth* do you think you’re doing?” Severus hisses.

— — —

Severus’ heart is thundering as he stares down at his son and his godson. He had been alerted to some kind of trouble by Weasley sending a patronus that Harrison had been involved in something in the village, then he had run into Magnus who, with quick whispered words, brought him up to speed. *Harrison compelled someone again.* Severus had been terrified for his son’s mental wellbeing based on his reaction to compelling Draco, and the elevated heart rate on Harrison’s bracelet didn’t discourage his fear. He had entered the town square and had followed the sound of yells and a gathering crowd around the back of the Three Broomsticks. Severus had feared his son losing control, perhaps even preparing to hurt himself in a terrible display of magic. He had perhaps expected a duel between Harrison and some of the young Death Eaters if Harrison had lost his temper. He had not expected a brawl.

“Both of you, with me,” Severus snarls, holding Harrison’s arm incredibly tightly and grabbing Draco’s as he drags them both down the street towards the Hogshhead. He notices the students stopping and staring but does not care. He walks them both like children, Harrison limp in his grip and Draco struggling every step of the way.

“Professor, this isn’t necessary - he started it -,” Draco wails, but Severus merely shakes him lightly and glares at him.

“Not a word, not a *word* out of either of you until we get back,” Severus growls.

“Godfather -,” Draco tries and Severus actually feels Harrison’s skin heat up under his touch at Draco’s words.

“No, Mr Malfoy,” Severus snaps. “Be *silent*. ”

As they walk, Severus hears whispers stirring around them. It’s clear that Harrison’s afternoon has not been quiet and his actions have not gone unnoticed.

“I heard he cursed someone in *parseltongue*!”

“I always knew he was dark, anyone who’s related to the *Blacks* has to be -,”

“I heard they had a muggle brawl -,”

“They’re related, aren’t they? Maybe they tried to kill each other -,”

“I know I would like to kill my cousin sometimes -,”

“He’s *not* my cousin!” Draco yells over his shoulder. Still, Harrison is silent.

Severus kicks open the door to the Hogshead pub. He gives Aberforth the curtest of nods and moves quickly to the fireplace, throwing in the powder and muttering for his office. Then he throws both boys into it and sighs heavily as they disappear, pinching the bridge of his nose. *What the fuck happened?*

“Best follow them,” Aberforth says with a chuckle. “No knowing what a pair like that might get up to without an eye on them.”

It couldn’t be more true. Severus nods and adds more powder before allowing himself to be sucked through the flames. On the other side, Harrison is leaning against Severus’ desk, arms folded, body studiously and worriedly casual. *Never a good sign*. Draco is standing in front of a gold cauldron, looking at his own reflection and his wounds. If they are not healed soon, there is no doubt Draco will use them as an excuse for something or other and that will bring Lucius to the castle. *That’s the last thing we fucking need*.

“Draco, go to the hospital wing,” Severus snaps.

“But he hit me! Like I’m some kind of muggle!” Draco protests.

“You had it coming,” Harrison mutters. “You’ve had it coming for fucking years, you wanker.”

“You can’t speak to me like that!” Draco glares at Severus. “He can’t speak to me like that! Father won’t *let* you let him speak to me like that!”

“Draco, whatever you believe *I* am the one in charge of discipline in Slytherin House,” Severus snarls. “Now go to the hospital wing immediately!”

“Fine!” Draco throws his way out of the room, letting the door slam.

Severus stares at Harrison. He does not relax his deliberately indolent posture. Severus is reminded, absurdly, of some of their first detentions last year. *When he was still afraid of me.* Severus slowly counts backwards in Greek. When he is out of numbers, he trusts himself to speak calmly.

“You hit him,” Severus says quietly.

“Yeah.” Harrison mutters, staring into the middle distance.

“You broke his nose.”

“Yeah.”

“You kicked him. When he was on the floor.”

“Yes.”

“He is under your Sanctuary.” Severus tries to keep his voice level as he folds his arms and stares at his son. He cannot stop thinking about how this will get back to the Dark Lord. *I need to stop it. I need to make sure he does not hear of this.* “Is that the kind of Lord you want to be known as?”

“One who doesn’t take crap?” Harrison mumbles in that irritatingly churlish tone. “Yeah, I reckon I do.”

“One that hurts people who cannot hurt them back?” Severus demands. *Look at me, talk to me, you teenage fucking Mage -*

“Do you even care why I punched him?” Harrison demands, his eyes flashing as he looks up at Severus. “Does it even matter?”

“Whatever he does he *cannot* raise a wand to you, Harrison,” Severus says, determinedly not allowing himself to raise his voice. “He cannot hit you back, and you *know* what happens if you lose control. If you curse him, he can protest his Sanctuary.”

“Good, he can fuck right off,” Harrison snaps. Severus tries to push his anger down but it doesn’t quite work.

“Then you will give him easy access to hurt you,” Severus snaps back. “To be used by the Dark Lord -,”

“Right, and he’s your *godson*, so it doesn’t matter who he hurts or what he’s doing or why he’s messing about with fucking cursed necklaces -,” Harrison interrupts.

“None of that is for you to worry about,” Severus snaps, though his rage is more for Bellatrix than for Harrison or Draco, for sure as anything, only Bellatrix would concoct such a foolish plan as to use a student to courier a cursed item directly to Albus’ desk. “And *language.*”

“He doesn’t care who he hurts and he’s trying to hurt someone in the castle!” Harrison yells. “He *compelled* Daphne!”

“Harrison,” Severus looks at him sharply. “You compelled Miss Greengrass.”

“Because she was fucking CURSED BY HIM!” Harrison screams, green magic pulsing from his skin. Severus can see the regret underneath the rage. “I know I did the wrong fucking thing, okay? You don’t need to tell me, but I only fucking did it because *he cursed her!* Do you even care why he did that? Do you even care why I hit him?”

Severus takes a deep breath. He needs Harrison to calm down but he also needs to protect him, and Severus cannot protect him from the secrets Draco might spill to the Dark Lord if he leaves Harrison’s Sanctuary. Severus also knows that when the Dark Lord hears the rumours that Harrison can cast in parseltongue, that will only enrage and fascinate him. *That is a painful problem for later.*

“Firstly, *language*,” Severus begins quietly. “Secondly, I care about the fact that at the start of term we had a very clear discussion about control -,”

“Controlling *magic*,” Harrison said mutinously. “Not controlling my instinct to beat his fucking face off -,”

“And this weekend I find you losing *all* control of your voice magic, compelling Miss Greengrass -,”

“She was cursed!”

“And you are a *Mage!*” Severus hisses, allowing some of his frustration to leak out. “We are trying to *conceal* your true powers, not display them, and on top of that, I come to Hogsmeade and find you brawling with a Death Eater! It is utterly reckless behaviour! Could you not stop and *think*, Harrison?”

Harrison stares at him for a long time. He is so still that for a moment, Severus wonders if he is breathing.

“That’s me,” Harrison shakes his head and stares at the ceiling. “Utterly fucking reckless.”

There is a coldness, a weariness about him that gives Severus sudden pause. He has a blooming, nasty sense of dread as if somewhere he has missed an important step and can’t work out what it is.

“Why did you hit him?” Severus demands.

“Why ask when you don’t fucking care?” Harrison crosses to the door.

“We are not done, Harrison,” Severus warns.

“We bloody are,” Harrison glares at him and his eyes are too bright, much too bright. His skin is glowing, particularly his fingertips. “Because if I stay around people right now I am literally going to set fire to something, so I’m going to piss off so you can go and comfort your *fucking* godson!”

With that, Harrison launches himself out of the dungeon and slams the door closed. Severus watches as the force of Harrison's magic causes the brickwork to splinter and sighs. *What did I miss?* The child cannot go around punching Draco, it's too dangerous, but Severus cannot help this feeling of disquiet. *Why is parenting constantly living with the sensation that every choice you make could be wrong?* The sense of unease only grows as he pens a quick missive to Narcissa:

Your presence is required at the hospital wing immediately. Draco has been in a muggle-style brawl with the Black Lord. Do not tell Lucius.

As Severus is feeding it into the flames of the floo, the door is slammed back open. For a moment, Severus imagines that it must be Harrison, returning to yell some more but it is Theodore, breathing as if he has sprinted all the way from the village.

"Where is he?" Theodore gasps.

"Do not make demands of me, Mr Nott," Severus snaps. He has had quite enough of teenage boys today. He has had quite enough for a lifetime. "If you are asking about Harrison, the answer is that he is clearly not here."

"Then where's Malfoy?" Theodore glares around the dungeon as if expecting Draco to be cowering under a desk.

"In the hospital wing."

"He's not getting punished?" Theodore stares at him incredulously.

"I do not punish students for receiving muggle beatings."

"Harry didn't tell you," Theodore takes a heavy breath and then rolls his eyes. "*Of course* he fucking didn't."

"Ten points from Slytherin for poor language," Severus snaps, the sense of disquiet only growing. "What did Harrison not tell me?"

"Draco started it," Theodore snaps, in a tone that sounds like he would quite like to string Draco up. "He forced himself ... he assaulted ... he *kissed* Harry."

The sense of unease unfolds inside of his into pure, clarified dread. *Draco, what have you done?*

"You must be mistaken," Severus says blankly. *Please be mistaken.*

"Must I? I felt it through the bond, I felt his despair and I knew what it was and then I *saw* it," Theodore hisses. "Blaise did too, but if you're so sure I'm wrong, check for your-fucking-self."

"Ten points from Slytherin for poor language *again*, and I shall, of course, verify your story with Mr Malfoy," Severus says.

“I don’t mean that, he’ll just lie to you,” Theodore snaps. “Use legilimency on me.”

Severus stares at this boy, this child who will be a Lord in two months' time and has just blatantly asked one of the best legilimens in the United Kingdom to scour his mind.

“You would invite me into your mind?” Severus’ voice drops low. “Have you any idea what you are asking, Mr Nott?”

Theodore is proving himself to be a very worthy Potions apprentice, but Severus does not think he is as naturally proficient with mind magic as Harrison will one day be.

“Don’t worry, I can get you out,” Theodore snaps. “I’ve been practising. For Dumbledore.”

Severus hesitates. An invitation does not feel like true consent, not with a minor. Theodore seems to be following the progress of his thoughts and steps closer.

“He’ll never tell you this, not willingly, you know he won’t. You have to see it,” Theodore’s eyes glitter dangerously. “If you’re going to deal with Draco the way you *should* then you have to see it. ”

“You will not instruct me on how to deal with my students and besides, this is not a painless process,” Severus says quietly. “It is not something I inflict upon a person without just cause.”

“If you could see every moment of Harry's abuse in Privet Drive, would you want to?” Theodore demands.

“You believe this is equivalent,” Severus feels nausea building in his stomach.

“I *know* it is,” Theodore snarls. His eyes are oddly blue more than his usual grey. “You need to see it. So do the charm.”

Severus hesitates. The answer to Theodore’s question is yes, of course, Severus has often longed to see it all, even though there is a terrible kind of morbidity in it. For even as he yearns for knowledge so that he can accurately dispense painful justice on the perpetrators, he knows that even witnessing the smallest moment of a childhood of abuse inflicted upon his only child will cause Severus unprecedented agony. Yet some things must be witnessed. A child’s despair is one of them, especially when Severus is the parent.

“Very well,” Severus raises his wand and sets himself the intention to be as soft as possible, as a fox’s paw prints in the snow. He cannot promise a painless charm, but he can promise to be careful. “I will endeavour not to hurt you.”

“I will endeavour to do the same,” Theodore says ominously. Severus only nods.

“*Legilimens.*”

Theodore has left the memory ready for him. Severus sees the package from Borgin and Burkes, and sees the opals of the necklace (*Sweet Circe is that the cursed necklace of Harmonia?*) He hears their wayward but worryingly accurate theories about Draco being the

sender and sees Harrison's compulsion followed by Greengrass' natural terror and betrayal. He sees Theodore encouraging Harrison to put his wand in his hand and Severus is grateful. *Hopefully, no one noticed the wandless casting.*

Then the memory moves and Severus sees his godson and son against the back wall of the Three Broomsticks. He sees how Draco's hand crushes Harrison's throat as he presses Severus' son against the wall. Severus feels a turbulent sickness of the violence of it. He sees Harrison's stillness. His heart stiffens because he knows that stillness. It is the stillness of someone who is used to being abused.

Then he sees the moment that Theodore rushes forwards, Zabini trying to hold him back, as Severus' son seems to resurface from some kind of zombie-like state. His son struggles and Severus realises why. *Because he's trying not to use magic or weapons. He's still trying not to hurt Draco so the Sanctuary isn't compromised.*

Then Harrison slams his head into Draco's. Being kissed by Draco has done something to him, Severus can see that in the way his son clutches his head, unsteady on his feet. He watches Harrison's rune mark flicker. Severus knows that there is magic under Harrison's skin desperate to burst through.

He sees Harrison fighting for control, but also sees how the words: "I'll tell everyone you liked it," spat out of Draco's mouth tip Harrison over the edge.

He sees the way Harrison kicks wildly at Draco and understands what it is. An attempt not to curse, not to kill, not to wipe Severus' godson from the very face of the earth with the tornado of magic under his skin. Severus understands that is a desperate final measure, and Severus is ashamed. *I blamed him.*

Then Severus hears Theodore's own thoughts from this memory that perhaps he has not intended to share: *I am going to kill Draco Malfoy with my bare fucking hands.*

Severus is evicted from Theodore's memory by a burning inside his mind, a wall of flame in the shape of an ancient shield which can only be the legendary mind shield Narcissa has clearly taught him. Suddenly, Severus is breathing heavily through the pain of it, blinking back into reality, feeling as if his eyes have stared too long into the sun.

"You wield your mind shield admirably," Severus says with a deep breath. It's such an obscure branch of mind magic, Severus never expected it to be successful yet here it is. A fully-fledged mind shield, like myth, come to life, in the mind of Theodore Asger Nott. Severus has an abrupt and unsettling thought: *perhaps my son is not the only child breaking all the traditional rules of magic.*

"It's a matter of faith," Theodore says quietly. Severus nods. One thing is clear: Theodore is flourishing under Narcissa's tutelage, that much is certain.

"What happens?" Severus asks quietly, considering what he saw. "When Harrison ... with the blood magic?"

“Memories,” Theodore says abruptly, face taut. “He’ll have seen Draco’s memories. Probably Draco’s memories about Harry.”

Severus closes his eyes briefly. He imagines the shame and frustration Draco would feel knowing that in his attempt to control Harrison, he gave away such intimacies. *He will be aghast.*

“What are you going to do about Draco?” Theodore snaps.

“I will deal with it and you will stay out of it,” Severus says. Theodore says nothing but his eyes shine with a familiar murderous intent. Severus steps closer. “I have seen what you asked me to see. I have understood the implications. Draco will be made to understand the implications, but let me be very clear, Mr Nott, you will not raise a wand or a knife or a hand to Mr Malfoy. Understood?”

Theodore just stares at him. There is a bond that blossoms between a Potions Master and his apprentice, even between a Master as sharp as Severus and an apprentice as truculent as Theodore. The sharing of secrets, the passing on of secret techniques, it builds something both reluctant and precious. Severus knows that Theodore does not want to lie to him, to risk the tentative trust that is growing between them as they work and brew.

“Mr Nott, if you hurt Mr Malfoy, I shall not continue our arrangement,” Severus says quietly. “Kindly verbally confirm you understand.”

“I can’t,” Theodore says tautly. “Harry is my ... we’re ... I felt his pain, it’s the bond, I just *can’t.*”

Severus understands. Theodore cannot make promises not to cause harm to Draco, there may be something in the bond that demands it. Once again, Severus is reminded of Lupin’s reticence about bonds similar to werewolf bonds. *It makes you crazy.* At that moment, a piece of paper shoots through the floo. Severus catches it and unravels it, seeing Narcissa’s elegant handwriting: *I shall meet you at the Entrance Hall. Five minutes.*

“Very well,” Severus nods. “Then I shall be forced to watch you to ensure your bond does not overcome your good sense. Come with me.”

He opens the door and gestures Theodore out. The boy looks sullen but follows. As soon as Severus closes the door behind him, they are greeted by a surprising group hurrying down the corridor. Weasley, Granger, Greengrass and Zabini all approach and Severus tries not to groan inwardly, since the last time this particular combination approached him, it was to tell him that his son was missing. Severus has not the time nor the inclination to indulge in conversation with them again.

“Mr Zabini, excellent,” Severus says, giving Theodore a small push in the back towards his friend. “I am remanding Mr Nott into your custody in Slytherin House for the rest of the day.”

“What? Why?” Granger asks, because of course she does. Theodore simply glares at Severus with a particular venom of a child murderer denied his prize.

“Because I say so,” Severus drawls. He nods at Mr Zabini who flexes his fingers, and orange ribbons of magic soar out of his hand, binding Theodore’s wrist to his.

“This again,” Theodore mutters, glaring at his friend. Mr Zabini simply shrugs with a casual smile. Severus carefully assesses Greengrass.

“Miss Greengrass,” he says quietly. “Are you well?”

She looks at him and glances at Theo. No doubt she has inferred that Theodore has told him of her brush with the imperius curse.

“Quite well, Professor,” she says softly.

“Take the rest of the day to rest. Sleep would be advisable,” he says. “Such curses have lingering impacts. Come to me if your mind still feels vulnerable tomorrow.”

Greengrass nods obediently and slips her hand into Zabini’s.

“Where’s Harry?” Weasley says abruptly to Theodore, who glares at Severus. The implication is clear: *you’re the last person to see him*.

“Your friend is likely outside,” Severus says, remembering Harrison’s words. *If I stay around people right now I am literally going to set fire to something*. “Now all of you get out of my sight and refrain from causing any more turmoil for the rest of the day. If you can possibly avoid it.”

Severus swoops past them and up into the Entrance Hall, just in time to see Narcissa walking through the front doors. She looks magnificent, dressed in a dark blue velvet dress and a black cloak.

“Lady Malfoy,” Severus says, bowing in front of her.

“Severus,” she says softly, reaching up to kiss both of his cheeks with her chilled lips. She pushes back her hood and her silver hair is damp. “You are well?”

Severus nods and they both take the stairs up to the hospital wing. Severus waits until the grinding sound of the staircase can cover their conversation before he speaks.

“There has been a development,” Severus mutters. “Draco assaulted Harrison in Hogsmeade. He kissed him without his consent in attempt to force Harrison to break his Sanctuary. It was ... aggressive.”

“And Harrison, did he ...?” Narcissa’s eyes are wide with worry. He shakes his head.

“Harrison did not respond magically.”

Narcissa’s eyes close in relief. Severus sees in them that perhaps, more than anyone else, Narcissa has the true measure of Harrison’s power. Perhaps she has even seen it in the glass. Severus knows better than to ask.

“You saw all this?” Narcissa whispers, opening her eyes with a steady breath.

“The mind of Mr Nott,” Severus nods. “The mind shield is impressive.”

Narcissa stiffens and sucks in a breath. She nods.

“He is an impressive young man,” she says. Severus glances at her face. He detects a hint of pride in her voice. He knows Narcissa and Theodore correspond regularly but he had not anticipated that Narcissa might develop true affection for the lone Nott heir. Still, it is not surprising. They are, both of them, fiercely intelligent, capable of prodigious violence and dedicated to a deliberate poise that is indicative of the very height of Sacred Twenty Eight breeding.

“The Dark Lord cannot know about this,” Narcissa says. “Or Lucius.”

“Precisely,” Severus mutters, staring pointedly at a portrait and not at his closest friend. They both know who the most likely leak of this information will be and he is sitting in the hospital wing at this moment. “We must be explicit. You must allow me to be ... firm with him.”

“He hurt your child,” Narcissa whispers. “Perhaps it is best I handle it.”

“I am capable of compartmentalising my feelings,” Severus says sharply.

“Are you sure?”

“If the roles were reversed, would you not wish to be the one to speak?”

“The roles were reversed, they are reversed,” Narcissa whispers. “Your child compelled mine and then beat him.”

“It does not justify sexual assault,” Severus says quietly. “Intentional. Deliberate. Designed to undercut his Sanctuary and if that happens, Cissa, if he is broken away from Harrison, if the compulsion breaks with it, if he can thoughtlessly relate what happened to him to the Dark Lord, for whom will he come? He will see through Draco’s words in a second. He will come for you, Draco will lose his defender and you will not only lose your life but lose your son.”

“Lucius will never let Draco be lost to the Dark Lord,” Narcissa whispers. Severus is not so convinced but he knows there is a worst option for whose tender cares Draco could end up in.

“He would not be able to stop your son from being lost to your sister,” Severus says. “If you are gone she will have him and you know exactly what she will do with him.”

Narcissa breathes out sharply through her nose and then nods.

“I understand. You may speak to him. I will allow you to be ... firm.”

“Thank you,” Severus says. “But you know, if Draco fails to keep silent, if the Dark Lord decides it is worth plundering his mind, Draco is not equipped with the defences to halt

him.”

“Do you think it likely?”

“I think the Dark Lord does not suspect Draco capable of such deceit. His vanity might protect us, but if anyone puts the seed of the idea of Draco’s betrayal ...”

“The only people who could do that are in this castle and have nothing to gain from it.”

“No secret is kept forever.” Severus wishes it were not true but his own life speaks to the validity of it.

“I know,” Narcissa’s voice is soft. “But we do not need forever. For now, we will do what we can to protect them all.”

They fall silent as the staircase rejoins the landing and they walk towards the Hospital Wing. *My godson assaulted my only child.* Inside his mind, Severus heaps the side of a mountain, icy and cold, on top of his rage. To distract himself from it, he tells himself firmly what he must do: *Ensure Draco’s compliance and silence, protect Harrison and Theodore from the Dark Lord and then apologise to my son.* Severus hopes that he will not be too late.

Chapter End Notes

When trauma happens, very rarely do people respond perfectly. Even in a magical world, humans are still humans and even with the best love and the best will, mistakes are made. Especially by parents.

If you have been sexually assaulted in the same manner as Harry in this chapter, if you feel familiar with having your consent removed in a similar way to Daphne in this chapter, if you are struggling with processing your own trauma in this area, you are not alone. What happened to you does not deserve to be diminished or dismissed. You are a survivor. You are worthy of seeking help. <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>

If you do not have personal experience of the type of trauma that is included in this chapter, please remember that there are people reading this story and reading the comments who do. Let's ensure that the comment space is a safe space for our friends and survivors.

Godfathers and Godsons

Chapter Notes

Are you still with me? Just a reminder: If you can't cope with 24 hours between chapters, please WAIT until Thursday to read all three chapters. Also this story is about trauma in every direction. These chapters are about trauma. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags this week and read my end notes.

This time, Severus and Harry have it out.
Next time, Theo has a lot of feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Draco is sitting on a bed in the hospital wing. His nose has been cleaned up but the bruises are already blooming across his face and he has his arms folded mulishly. Severus knows this will not be an easy conversation.

“Mother,” Draco looks between them. “What are you doing here?”

Narcissa nods at Severus and he pulls the curtain close around the three of them. He casts a wordless *muffliato* and Narcissa folds her hands in front of her body. Then, she and Severus stand at the end of the bed, waiting in silence for Draco’s veneer of brashness to melt slightly. Slowly, Draco unfolds his arms and sets his hands down in lap, rubbing his trousers nervously.

“You - you heard what happened?” Draco whispers to his mother. She nods, her face impassive and neutrally terrifying. “Mother, you have to -,”

Narcissa holds up a long finger and Draco falls silent, staring petrified up at his silent mother. Narcissa’s gift has always been to say everything she needed to without opening her mouth.

“I ... I know I shouldn’t have brawled,” Draco whispers to his knees. “I know it is - it is unbecoming of the Malfoy Heir. I didn’t ... I am sorry, Mother.”

Severus quietly marvels at how impressive Narcissa truly is. She looks as if she is carved out of marble, she does not speak and barely moves, yet Draco is reduced to a stuttering mess. It is not fear, Severus realises. The pressure of Narcissa’s potential disappointment carries its own unique pain. The only unfortunate thing is that Narcissa is not Draco's only parent. Eventually, Lucius' long influence always wears through. Right now, however, Draco’s eyes are fixed warily on his mother as she stares at him for a long moment and then, gently, gestures to Severus.

“You will never touch him again,” Severus says darkly.

Narcissa doesn’t move at all, but Severus feels the minute change in her breath beside him. She understands that this is not only an instruction from a godfather to his godson but a threat from the father of a wronged child. As soon as Severus starts to speak, Draco’s apparent terror in front of Narcissa’s silence dissolves. *There it is*, Severus thinks wrily. Lucius. Just like his father, Draco has never been able to maintain contrition for very long.

“I didn’t *touch* him, what did he say?” Draco glowers.

“Draconis,” Narcissa says and Draco stiffens at his full name. “You are under the Sanctuary of the House of Black. He is your Lord.”

You must *never* touch him again,” Severus repeats.

“Because he’s my Lord or because he’s too powerful?” Draco folds his arms and glares at Severus. “It’s bullshit!”

“Language,” Narcissa rebukes, sitting down on her son’s bed and flicking him sharply on the shin with her perfect fingernails. Draco flinches. “Because he belongs to the Dark Lord.”

“That’s not true,” Draco snorts naively.

“The Dark Lord keeps your Aunt like a dog on a leash,” Narcissa says quietly. “Why do you think that is?”

“That’s because she likes it, not because of Potter,” Draco shrugs and does not notice his mother’s subtle flinch in the flicker of her eyebrows. Draco has never been competent at reading his own mother’s grief. She has shielded him from it for so long.

“How did your Aunt lose her finger?” Severus demand.

“Because he wanted it.”

“Why?” Severus presses.

“Because he did?”

“No, Draco, because she took *his*,” Narcissa says, her voice softly emphatic. Draco’s eyes are confused and then they widen. Severus sees the penny drop. For all that he loves his godson, it is abominably hard to love him today. Harrison is his son. His precious, wounded son who has fought so dramatically and drastically back from every abuse only to have more inflicted upon him. At the hands of Severus’ own godson. The conflicting pull of these bonds, of his devotion to his child and his love of his godson, chafe against him. He piles ice upon them inside his mindscape and takes a slow breath in. *I will not feel this now. None of it. There is work to be done.*

“The Dark Lord punished Auntie Bella for ... for *hurting* Potter?” Draco whispers. “He doesn’t want Potter hurt?”

“What our Master has claimed, no one can touch. Since his resurrection, he has claimed the next Lord Black.” Narcissa says quietly. Severus tries not to bristle against the words. *Harrison is not the Dark Lord’s. He is mine.* “What punishment do you think he will have if he should find out that you ... assaulted what is his?”

“I didn’t assault him!” Draco’s eyes are full of panic. “I didn’t try to kill him and Auntie Bella hurt him *much* worse -,”

“And she was terribly punished, Draco. You kissed him.” Narcissa’s voice is icy. “Forcibly. Without his consent. It is terrible manners.”

“And aside from that, the Dark Lord will not view it kindly if he hears,” Severus says.

“That’s not fair! It’s not my fault!” Draco hisses desperately. “Potter, he - he’s driving me crazy! He’s walking around like he owns everything, like he’s so powerful and magical and he looks at me like I’m absolute *dung* and it’s not my fault that father kidnapped him!”

“But your father did kidnap him,” Severus says sharply.

“I didn’t choose that!” Draco yells.

“I know, darling, you are not responsible for your father’s choices but you must live with them,” Narcissa strokes her son’s shin tenderly. For a brief second, Draco looks tremulous but then it morphs quickly into petulance.

“I just ... I want things to be how they were before everything,” Draco mumbles. “When Potter was ...”

“Was what?” Severus snaps. *What do you want from my child?*

“He used to see me,” Draco mutters down at his hands. “He used to look at me like I was worth a fight, we used to *fight* and I mattered and now ... he doesn’t even look at me. If I’m not under his sanctuary anymore then at least he’ll look at me. He’ll see me as a threat, he’ll ... he’ll see me again.”

Severus is glad Narcissa is there. If she were not, there is a real possibility he would give his godson more than an unreasonable tongue lashing because he sees Draco’s actions for what they were: ultimately spoiled, ultimately selfish, a need to make himself the centre of Harrison’s ire once more, as he was when they were younger. Severus wonders, horribly, if Draco sees his servitude under the Dark Lord as merely another chance to catch Harrison’s attention.

“This is not a game, Draco,” Severus steps closer to his godson and allows himself to loom over him. “This is not a teenage frolic or a chase for a snitch, your father is on the edge of waging war in Europe and you are a sworn servant of the Dark Lord. He will kill you if he finds out what you have done today.”

“He needs me,” Draco pales. “I have a task.”

“Which others can take. He made four other students Death Eaters at the New Moon.”

“But it’s my task!”

“And the boy is his,” Severus says curtly. “It is a foolish man underestimates how possessive the Dark Lord can be.”

“I’m not a fool,” Draco sulks, frowning. “Why does he want him? What’s so special about *him*?”

Severus can already see the shift in Draco’s mind. Now, his jealousy is for the Dark Lord’s favour. Lucius raised a child who always seeks the best, especially when someone else has it.

“Do not wish for the Dark Lord’s affection, Draco,” Severus looks at his godson with a hard expression. “Unless you wish to join your Aunt in his bed.”

Draco pales considerably and Severus adds silently: *and your father*. Narcissa looks at Draco intently, her hand still resting on his shin.

“We will tell no one what happened,” she says softly. “That way, the Dark Lord will never know and will not turn his ire against you.”

Unless the Dark Lord decides to ravage your mind, Severus thinks bitterly. *Then we are all profoundly fucked*.

“This is stupid ” Draco folds his arms mulishly. "The Dark Lord likes me, he'd not do that. Why would he do that to me?"

The problem with this is that Draco has not met the Dark Lord yet, not truly. He has not seen with his own eyes how horrifying his punishments can be to those who follow him. Lucius would feel too much shame in expressing the truth of it and Narcissa hoped that it would never be relevant. Severus never imagined it would be within his role as godparent to bring the realities of Death Eater life to his godson, but here he finds himself. Narcissa looks at Severus and nods. Now is the time to be firm. Severus puts his hand on Draco’s chin, jerking up his face to look fearfully into Severus’ eyes.

“The Dark Lord is possessive of the boy and there is nothing the Dark Lord will not do for something he desires,” Severus says, annunciating clearly and slowly. “There is no one he will not kill, there is no curse too awful. This is not a punishment he will defer to your father, Draco, and if the notion of being forced to shed your clothes and your innocence for the Dark Lord does not deter you from pursuing the Dark Lord’s attention over Potter, consider this: more than death, he will make you suffer. He will humiliate you.” Draco’s eyes widen. Of course, Severus realises, the idea of dying is too abstract for a child like Draco who has never walked close to it. Humiliation and suffering, however, that he understands. Severus continues. “He will compel you to do things that sicken you for his enjoyment, he will make you scramble and beg on the floor in front of your peers whilst they laugh. He will tell them to strip you and abuse you and taunt you cruelly whilst you are helpless and they will do it.”

“They wouldn’t,” Draco whispers tearfully.

“They would,” Severus says simply. “They would do it rather than face the same themselves because they know and their own parents know the horrors that await those who do not please the Dark Lord. So they will do it and you will be shamed by them and lose all their respect. They will look on you with disgust as if you are little more than an animal for the Dark Lord to use. He will use you and they will watch. Then, when you think you can no longer bear the pain, when you wish that you would rather be dead than be so undignified, so reduced, he will tear your mind apart. Every secret thought, every idle daydream, every private fantasy you have ever had about Potter or about *anyone* he will rip from your mind to taunt you with.”

“Why?” Draco gasps, tears on his cheeks.

“Because the Dark Lord *always* gets what he wants.” Severus pauses and looks into Draco’s damp eyes as he lowers his voice to his most dangerous pitch. These are the lessons every Death Eater parent must give their child, the terrifying tales of the Dark Lord’s worst punishments to keep them safe from dying under them. “Then, when your mind is broken, when you are desolate and little more than a shell with your worst and most shameful memories pulled out of you like your guts, he will call *me*. He will be bored and disinterested and so he will command me to take what is left from your mind, order me to open every secret box I find and spill them for his interest and when I am done, when you are *nothing*, he will kill you and you will not be glad of it. You will not be proud or standing. You will be naked, covered in your own waste, drooling and agonised and too unaware to know your own name. You won’t *know* to be glad, Draco. All you will be is pitiful and it will be a mercy to all of us when you are finally dead.”

“You don’t -,” Draco wrenches his chin away from Severus, his hands shaking as he wipes his tears. “You don’t mean that!”

Neither Severus nor Narcissa speaks. Their silence does everything they need it to. Besides, nothing they have said is untrue. Death Eaters who betray the Dark Lord die this way, if they are caught. Order of the Phoenix members die similarly. Dorcas Meadowes, whom the Dark Lord compelled to debase herself in horrific ways, Marlene McKinnon, whose mind Severus was ordered to completely destroy, Benjamin Fenwick, whom the Dark Lord tortured brutally until he was so physically broken, he was little more than a puddle on the floor. For a second, Severus imagines that Draco can see their deaths in both Severus’ and Narcissa’s eyes. The truth of it. Then Draco starts to shake, tears on his cheek.

“Our Lord is the most powerful Lord on earth,” Narcissa says simply. “His boons are wondrous. His punishments are hell on earth. If he finds out you did this, we will not be able to save you from it.”

“Mother, I don’t want ...” Draco whispers. Severus doesn’t need legilimency or any skill at all to see what is in Draco’s mind: *I don’t want to die*. Narcissa strokes away her son’s tears.

“Then let us protect you. Do exactly what we say.” Narcissa is wise. She cannot promise Draco life. Neither of them can. Only that they will do every fucking little thing in their power to protect him. She reaches down and pushes back Draco’s sleeve, revealing his Dark Mark and gently stroking the marked skin there. “He can always find you now, my dragon. We must give him no reason to punish you.”

“Which is why we will tell *no one*, ” Severus repeats. Draco seems to finally understand the words.

“Not father?” He whispers.

“No one,” Narcissa says. She cups her son’s face. “Learn this well, son. When you are the Dark Lord’s servant, you never play with his toys.”

Draco swallows hard and nods, painfully.

“I won’t say anything,” he whispers. “I’ll ... I’ll never touch him again.”

Severus nods. Between him and Narcissa, he feels a modicum of relief.

“But when I complete my task, the Dark Lord will favour me,” Draco whispers, clutching his mother’s hand. His eyes take on a familiar fervent expression. In them, Severus sees Lucius. “I won’t matter what I’ve done, I’ll be too valuable to him, too precious to lose and I promise you, Mother, I’ll rise and bring favour to us *all*. You’ll see.”

Narcissa says nothing and what could she possibly say? Severus and Narcissa do not desire favour like Lucius, they desire survival. Draco has listened, he has been frightened but he has not learned anything. He has not yet seen that the higher a person rises in the Dark Lord’s favour, the further they have to fall. Severus has had enough of Death Eaters believing that favour will come to them even as they writhe under the Dark Lord’s wand. *I have more important things to do*. Severus touches Narcissa’s shoulder in a brief goodbye and then marches out of the hospital wing. Now he has secured that the Dark Lord will not receive an account of Harrison’s frailty at Draco’s hand (which the Dark Lord would no doubt delight in) and that Draco will not suffer for it, Severus has to find his son. He has an apology to make.

— — —

Stupid, fucking stupid Draco, I’m so stupid why did I do that? He calls Severus his Godfather - I don’t want to think about that. Won’t think about that. No.

Harry sits on the stone overlooking the Black Lake and sticks both of his hands into the water, letting magic diffuse through it. From his left hand, the Black magic sends globs of ice floating to the surface, shaped like snowflakes. From his right, the Slytherin magic bursts sparks and bubbles of hot air rise up like carbonated streams. The Peverell magic doesn’t seem to care much about water and silver threads chase one another along the surface like weeds. The Prince magic is silent. Harry’s not surprised. He looks at the black stone under the water and lets his tears mingle with the rain on his face.

Godfather. Godfather. Godfather.

Over and over he hears the familiar tone in Draco's voice, pleading and expectant, like it's a word that he's used his whole life. Severus chose to be Draco's godfather, Harry imagines that he was asked, just like James and Lily asked Sirius and Remus. He imagines that Severus smiled in the way that he does when he laughs, covering his mouth as if astonished. Harry imagines how happy Severus must have been to take on the responsibility of his best friend's child, to watch him grow. Maybe Severus imagined teaching him Potions, maybe Severus already did, maybe Severus stood next to Draco whilst he stirred a Potion and told him all rhythm is song, just like he told Harry. Severus chose to be Draco's and to have Draco be his godson, to help raise him. If there's one thing Harry is sure of in this life it's that Severus didn't choose him. He didn't choose to make him, he didn't choose to claim him, circumstances forced Severus' hand at every turn. It's no surprise, really, that he would choose Draco now.

"Who the fuck would choose me anyway?" Harry mutters to himself. *Especially after I did such a fucking terrible thing to Daphne.*

"Why is Master sitting in the rain?"

Harry turns to see Kreacher standing behind him. Sahara is around his neck and quickly slithers down Kreacher's small body to wind her way up Harry's thigh.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asks hoarsely.

"Heir Nott asked Kreacher to find Master," Kreacher glares at Harry like he's an imbecile. "It is raining."

"Yeah, I'm aware."

"*You are sorrowful,*" Sahara hisses.

"*Yes.*"

"*You tasted blood magic.*"

"*I didn't mean to,*" Harry sniffs and wipes his tears, letting Sahara climb to his neck and comfort him with her dry, cold scales. "*A lot of things happened that I didn't mean to.*"

"Why is Master sitting in the rain?" Kreacher demands.

Harry nods down towards his hands. Kreacher looks over the edge of the stone and sniffs.

"Master is angry," he says.

Harry shrugs. Kreacher sighs heavily and clicks his fingers. An umbrella appears above Harry's head. Harry snorts and looks up at it.

"Where did you get an umbrella with the Black family crest?"

"Kreacher made it."

“You’re a one-elf branding machine.” Harry chuckles.

“Kreacher has many talents,” Kreacher grins. “Did Master bring Kreacher’s fiery sweets?”

“No, I didn’t get a chance to go to Honeydukes,” Harry sighs miserably and stares down at his hands. “Bullshit happened.”

Kreacher stares at him for a long time and then reaches into his tiny pocket and pulls out a curly wurly. He breaks it in half and offers one half to Harry.

“Wow, Kreacher,” Harry smirks.

“Do not make Kreacher regret it,” Kreacher scowls and holds the piece of curly wurly just out of reach. “And Kreacher expects payment. With interest.”

“Fine,” Harry shakes his head and leans forward to take a bite from the curly wurly where Kreacher holds it in front of his mouth. He chews slowly. “How much interest?”

“One curled wurlied for each bite,” Kreacher croaks. Harry nods solemnly and starts trying to work out how many average bites there are in a curly wurly.

“Hey.” Harry turns to see Ron standing behind him, hair dripping with rain. “Room for one more under there?”

“Depends,” Kreacher holds out a hand. “What sweets does Master’s Weasel have?”

Harry rolls his eyes but Ron obediently empties his pockets.

“A sugar quill, some jelly slugs and pepper imps,” Ron says, brushing water out of his eyebrows.

“Slugs and imps,” Kreacher demands, holding out his two hands and Ron drops them into his waiting hands before shuffling under the umbrella. “Kreacher will tell Heir Nott Master is safe.”

Kreacher pops away. Ron pulls something else out of his pocket, a tooth-splintering strong mint.

“Here,” he says. “Zabini said you looked like you’d been sick.”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbles. “Can you -?”

He jerks his head down towards the water. Ron looks over the edge, nods firmly and then unwraps the mint. Harry obediently opens his mouth and Ron pops it in.

“Thanks,” Harry mutters, the sharp sting of the spearmint making his eyes sting.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Ron asks quietly.

“Nothing,” Harry sniffs.

“Nothing?” Ron repeats. “Hermione’s crying because you compelled Greengrass, Bill’s got some kind of crazy cursed necklace, Greengrass isn’t even talking anymore and Zabini has, like, got Nott tied up in orange ropes to stop him killing Malfoy. Merlin, Harry! All I did was go to the bloody forest to look for *Wrackspurts* and you ... what the hell did you do?”

“Fuck,” Harry rubs his eyes. “This is all my fucking fault.”

“Maybe,” Ron says cheerfully. “Tell me and I’ll let you know.”

“Fine,” Harry mumbles. “Daphne got hold of this cursed necklace and I compelled her not to touch it and she was really mad and it made me sick and then Draco just ... he followed me -,”

“You’re calling him Draco,” Ron’s eyes widen.

“Shit, yeah,” Harry rubs his forehead. His scar is tingling and itching again. “It’s something to do with the Sanctuary, it’s like I can’t *not* call him that, I have to ... I have to really try and I’m so tired -,”

And besides, I saw all his fucking memories. Harry had always assumed that the reason Draco hated him all these years was because he thought he was half-blooded. The revelation that Draco has hated him all this time because Harry didn’t do exactly what he wanted to when they first met, that Harry didn’t fall into the role Draco had assigned him in his head, like some kind of toy that he wanted to possess and manipulate is sort of sickening. *He never thought I was real person. He just saw the Boy-Who-Lived.* It’s creepy and the weird obsessive nature of it can only remind Harry of one person: *Tom*. Harry shivers.

“That’s fine, mate, don’t worry right now. We can call him Dickface Draco, doesn’t matter to me,” Ron shrugs. Harry lets out a bark of sharp laughter. It means so much, suddenly, that Ron is here and not running away from him, disgusted. *Get away from me*, Daphne said. He doesn’t blame her. He wouldn’t blame any of them if they never spoke to him again.

“Thanks, mate,” he chokes out, smiling painfully.

“You know I’m always up for Dogshit Draco names,” Ron rubs Harry’s back, eyebrows creased in worry. “What did he do?”

“Well, he started to say all this shit about how I’m like Voldemort -,”

“Is that why you clobbered him?” Ron asks.

“No, everyone says I’m like Tom,” Harry sighs.

“Then why?”

“Because ... he was trying to force me to - to curse him. If I curse him, he can protest his Sanctuary.”

“So ... battering him seemed easier, what?”

“He ...”

Harry remembers feeling trapped. He remembers feeling cold, feeling dead, unable to stop the blood magic racing through his body.

Blood magic is complicated Necromancy, Greenheart. You were not at fault.

It's always my fault, Harry thinks back, stroking Sahara's head. *Always.*

“Harry?” Ron prompts.

“He kissed me,” Harry mumbles, feeling his cheeks flush with embarrassment. It sounds so stupid, suddenly. *Why the fuck am I so upset? Why didn't I just laugh at him?*

“What?” Ron stares at him.

“He kissed me,” Harry sniffs again and wipes his eyes with his wet hand, unable to hold back the tears even as he hates himself for it. *Why am I making this a big deal?* Secretly, Harry knows why. *Petunia holds him under the water, Dudley tases him, Umbridge takes his shirt off, Bellatrix holds him down and cuts him open. Draco presses him against the wall and kisses him.* “And then everything went to fucking shit and everyone hates me and Severus is so mad at me ...”

“Okay,” Ron's voice sounds oddly tight, as if he's trying to stop shouting. “I'm gonna go ahead and assume that this wasn't a kiss you asked for?”

“Of course it wasn't! He grabbed my neck, Ron! He pushed me against the wall and he wouldn't -” Harry yells, but then his anger vanishes, deflating like a balloon. *I made Petunia mad, I wound Dudley up, I stood up to Umbridge, I screamed too much for Bellatrix.* “But ... I was baiting him. It was my fault, I should have just -,”

“No, Harry, this is absolutely not your fault,” Ron's magic smells like a forest full of dense trees in the rain. Power leeching from the hot earth. “What he did, it's not on. You definitely should have clobbered him. Well done. Good job. Fifty points to not-Slytherin-not-Gryffindor.”

Harry snorts with laughter and rests his head on Ron's shoulder. Taking a shuddering breath, he lets his tears fall. Ron says nothing, merely lifts a hand to stroke Harry's damp curls. It's absurdly comforting but Harry still aches.

“I wish Sirius was here,” he mutters under his breath.

“Yeah?”

Harry nods.

“I know he was shit at so many things but he - he would have assumed Dickface Draco had done something. He would have been on my side.”

Unlike Severus, Harry thinks miserably.

“Yeah. He would have beat the shit out of him,” Ron chuckles. “Started a ruddy riot in the middle of Hogsmeade.”

“And probably would have ended back up in Azkaban,” Harry smirks wetly into Ron’s shoulder.

“Padfoot had form, it has to be said.”

“Yeah, he did.” Harry sighs heavily. He’s tired, suddenly, so tired that his true worries trip off his tongue. “Severus loves Draco. He’s his godfather.”

“Okay,” Ron takes the end of Harry’s curly wurly and bites it thoughtfully. “Are you ... mad about it?”

“No,” Harry breathes out a long sigh and looks down at his hands in the water. They’re starting to go numb. It’s probably a good thing. “I just ... miss Sirius.”

I miss his fury. I miss his violence. Harry knows it’s fucked up but it feels true. He imagines Sirius, holding Draco at wand point and it helps. The pain lessens. When he thinks of Severus, staring at him quietly, no outrage at all, telling him he needs to keep on, to endure, to find a way to bear whatever Draco does to him, the pain opens up again.

“Did you tell Snape about what happened?”

“He doesn’t care,” Harry’s voice becomes harsh. *He wouldn’t believe me if I did. He would believe Draco.*

“How do you know if you don’t tell him?” Ron says reasonably.

“Eat the curly wurly,” Harry mutters. “Take big bites though. It’s costing me.”

Ron shrugs and strokes Harry’s back a bit.

“Aren’t you ... mad at me?” Harry asks hesitantly. “That I ...compelled Daphne? And ... I did it to Draco too, y’know, over the summer, I didn’t meant to at the time but ... it was bad.”

Ron takes a big sigh and stares out over the water.

“Dad didn’t like compulsions,” he says quietly. “Did you know they’re used a lot on muggles?”

“No,” Harry whispers.

“Yeah, Ministry officials have an exemption to cast compulsions on muggles to protect the statute of secrecy. Dad hated it. He hated the statute of secrecy too, he wanted more muggles to know, like the ones who do the army and ... I dunno, the thing with all the boats?”

“The navy,” Harry smiles.

“Yeah, exactly,” Ron nods. “He wanted them to be told, not just the royals and the Prime Minister. Dad used to say that ‘for their own good’ was the worst phrase in the English language.”

Harry is assaulted by a sudden memory of hiding under the table in the Leaky Cauldron when he was thirteen, hearing Mr and Mrs Weasley arguing about whether to tell Harry about Sirius. He remembers how angry Mr Weasley was that Fudge hadn’t told Harry the truth: *Harry’s got a right to know*. The thought makes Harry smile with fondness and then, suddenly, feel hideous. There’s one person he knows who always does things ‘for his own good.’

Dumbledore.

“You know, Dad told me that what makes compulsions bad is not what they make people do, it’s what they make people *not* do,” Ron says thoughtfully. “They take away a person’s ability to see danger, to protect themselves. He told me this story about a person who was compelled to do something one time and he was so focused on doing exactly that, he jumped off a cliff. He wasn’t compelled to jump, he just ... didn’t see the danger. Couldn’t feel it, anymore.”

“Yeah,” Harry sniffs. “When Voldemort had me under the imperius curse for a bit it was like ... so good for a bit. All the pain was gone and there was only this one thing I had to do, Hermione says it’s like muggle drugging.”

“I dunno, Harry,” Ron says thoughtfully. “Because, like, healers don’t use compulsions *ever*. But muggle healers, the lads who do all the cutting and stitching and stuff, they use drugs all the time, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” Harry swallows hard. “Why... why don’t they use compulsions? I mean, if someone was really sick and needed to be stopped from hitting themselves -,”

”They’d never use a compulsion,” Ron says, with scandalised horror.

“Why not?” Harry asks meekly.

”Merlin, Harry, this is ... this is bloody difficult to explain,” Ron puffs out his cheeks and shakes his head. “Sometimes I forget you grew up so muggle. ‘Mione too.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t,” Harry mutters. Ron sighs and stares out over the Black Lake.

”I wish I knew more muggle stuff,” Ron says quietly. “I wish Dad was here. He’d ... he’d know how to explain this bollocks.”

Harry chokes down tears.

”Just try,” he mumbles.

“Okay,” Ron sighs heavily. “Compulsions aren’t like, just some other spell, Harry. It’s not like if I had to de-Gnome the garden and they were being wankers I’d just compel them to

trot off rather than wellying them over the fence, even if they do the same thing they're not the same. Like, it's ...” Ron shakes his head. “It's because of the war.”

“The war?”

“They've got this history, Harry, a really nasty history.” Ron's voice drops low. “Mum always tells this story about how Snakeface got to this witch who lived up in the village and compelled her to do shit and Mum said the worst thing was how she was afterwards, like she couldn't trust anyone. She felt like everyone could be lying to us and it took ages to get over that. They're this weapon that like, I dunno, only evil people use because, like, we have potions, right? Mum always says anything that could be done with a compulsion could be done with a potion or a different spell but Death Eaters just liked the power.”

“I don't like power,” Harry mutters. “And potions aren't better, I was kidnapped with a potion!”

“I know, mate,” Ron sighs mournfully. “I'm sorry, It's like a chess match where you get a stalemate, you know? There's no clear cut move, it's all grey and a bit shit.”

“This feels pretty important to be all grey and a bit shit,” Harry mumbles.

“I know, I know,” Ron sighs. “I wish I was ... I know I'm doing an arse job explaining, I'm pissing it up, I don't know *any* muggle things but it's - it's ...,” Ron's voice trails off. He looks into the distance. “It's just so many people, Harry, good people, did terrible things because of compulsions in the last war. And some people were really really hurt by them, especially girls.”

“Why girls?”

“I think you should talk to Greengrass about it,” Ron says softly. Harry nods but he doesn't think Daphne will ever talk to him again.

“And then there were some people, like fucking Lucius Malfoy, who used compulsions as a bloody excuse to get out of Azkaban,” Ron says fiercely. “Ruddy wanker. He was probably compelling everything that moved!”

“But it's the people's fault, not the magic,” Harry whispers.

“I know, Harry,” Ron groans and rubs his forehead. “This was the problem, at least that's what Dad says. They couldn't put magic in Azkaban for just existing so they banned the imperious curse.”

“But not all compulsions.”

“Because of the statute of Secrecy, yeah,” Ron nods. “Do you ... do you get it? Like, it's just so *bad*. The unforgivable curses are unforgivable because, like, wixen aren't going to *ever* forgive what happened last time. I think ...” Ron darts him an unsure look. “You've been like, exposed to some super shit people, people who should be in Azkaban for thousands of years, and they've done these spells on you and ... I dunno, maybe it made

them more normal, less fucking terrifying and insane and like, I dunno, morally disgusting than they really are?"

Ron looks very nervous. Harry takes a deep breath and thinks about it. *Do I think those spells are normal?* Harry thinks about the moment in the classroom when Crabbe had cast. What was he expecting? *A crucio*, probably.

"Yeah, maybe," Harry whispers. "Kind of difficult not to expect them as part of my daily life after Mad-Eyes lesson."

"Yeah, no fucking surprise that he turned out to be a Death Eater," Ron snorts. "No wonder so many parents wrote in after that lesson."

"They did?"

"Of course they did, Harry!" Ron gives Harry a dismayed look and then sighs. "I guess it's kind of what Hermione says about muggles sometimes, y'know, a cultural thing."

"I think so." Harry does not feel better. Now he feels like he's a stupid muggle who stupidly did an evil thing that offended all the Wixen around him without realising. "I'm so fucking stupid."

"You are not," Ron says fiercely, pulling him close. "You couldn't drop me down in the muggle world and expect me not to be a bloody mess sometimes, I'd definitely get arrested!"

"Yeah, probably," Harry snorts wryly. "So did I do something ... unforgivable?"

"Nah. Look, mate, people might be worked up now, but they won't be forever," Ron says, reasonably. "She's your friend, right?"

"Yeah, and that makes it *worse*," Harry's voice starts to tremble. "I know I've done horrible things but they've always been things I've done to, like, *bad* people. But doing this to a friend, I ... I feel like I must be a shitty person if I did it."

"You're not," Ron squeezes his shoulder. "I'd know, okay? I've known you the longest of anyone here, I'd *know* if you were a shitty person. You just ... did a shitty thing."

"What if I become a shitty person?" Harry says miserably.

"Then I'll make you a *Potter Stinks* badge," Ron snorts with laughter. "I'll lob it at your head."

Harry huffs, but it does the job. He remembers that night in fourth year, the *Potter Stinks* badge thrown across the Gryffindor common room.

"I did a shitty thing to you then," Ron says softly. "You forgave me, right?"

"You weren't doing illegal magic though, Ron," Harry sniffs. "You were just a bit of a dick."

"It hurt you all the same though, didn't it?"

Harry nods tearfully. He knows it's not the same but it does help him to think that Daphne might not be mad forever.

"It'll be okay," Ron says reflectively.

"How do you know?" Harry says tremulously.

"Because Luna told me," Ron shrugs. "I trust Luna."

Trust your fae friend, Sahara whispers into Harry's mind, pressing her nose against the place she likes to bite him.

"Yeah," Harry sighs. "Me too."

"Mr Weasley." They both turn to see Severus standing in the rain. He looks sort of like a drowned bat but impressively, it doesn't stop him from looking intimidating as fuck. "Leave us, please."

"I'll be in the Gryffindor common room if you need me," Ron squeezes Harry's shoulder before getting up. He pulls the hood of his anorak over his head and heads off in the rain. Severus moves closer without a word and stares at Harrison's hands in the water.

"How do you feel?" He asks quietly. Harry shrugs. "Why can I see two types of magic coming out of where the Slytherin ring sits?"

Harry's too tired to hold onto that particular secret, no matter what Griphook said about telling no one about the Peverells. *Theo knows anyway*.

"Peverell magic," he says dully. Severus breathes in sharply through his nose.

"You have the Peverell magic not just the Slytherin magic," he says. "You did not tell me."

"Yeah, well, *you* didn't tell me it was a Peverell ring," Harry shrugs. He doesn't care much that Severus knew.

"I did not know until Albus told me," Severus says. "When did you know?"

"When it jumped on my finger," Harry snorts. "Guess we both kept secrets."

There is silence for a long moment and Severus doesn't deny it.

"Come with me," he says.

Harry expected this. He pulls his hands back out of the water. They are numb and cold but he shoves them into his pockets and rises. Severus takes the umbrella from him and holds it over them both as they walk through the rain. Harry feels Severus' wand tip press against his shoulder and a warming charm spread through his body. Just the feeling of it makes Harry want to cry again, because it's not *fair* that Severus is being nice to him when he loves Draco so much. Harry squeezes his hands into fists inside his jacket pockets.

I will not cry, I will not cry.

Your Sire guards you, Sahara flickers her tongue into his ear. Listen to him.

He loves Draco, Harry thinks back fiercely.

It does not mean you are not his hatchling.

Severus gives him a significant look when they pass the Greenhouse, eyes resting on Sahara and Harry knows she needs to make herself scarce before they go back into the castle. Harry sharply misses living at Spinner's End, where Sahara can be with him all the time, invisible or otherwise.

Go, he strokes her scales.

Listen to your Sire, Greenheart. She slides away down his body towards the tropical greenhouse. *To what is said and unsaid.*

Harry's not surprised when Severus leads them wordlessly down to his office, holding open the door for Harry and then guiding him through the secret passageway to his quarters. Harry flops down on the familiar sofa without a word and Severus stands, looking down at him for a long moment. Harry says nothing, he's determined to keep silent. *I won't say sorry for hurting Draco. I won't. He can't make me say sorry for this.*

"I owe you an apology," Severus says quietly. "I am sorry."

Harry stares.

What the fuck?

"What?" he says, abruptly forgetting his resolve not to speak. He has literally never heard Severus apologise, he wasn't even sure Severus *could* apologise. Harry's never wanted an apology for all the shit that has happened between them, never asked for it, but this feels like he's been punched in the chest. Severus does nothing but stares solemnly back at him.

"I am sorry that I did not ask why you hit him," Severus speaks slowly but clearly. "I will not offer excuses. I am sorry that I did not listen appropriately."

Harry swallows. He knows Severus would never apologise without all the facts. Someone must have given them to him. There's only one person who would have the balls to do that.

"Theo told you."

Severus nods.

"He showed me."

Severus saw it. Harry winces and closes his eyes, lying back completely on the sofa with his hand over his face. He doesn't know why this feels so utterly devastating, only that it does. *He knows now. I have to deal with it.*

“Well then,” Harry says dully. “You saw.”

“He cannot be punished,” Severus’ voice is sorrowful and Harry can’t bear that.

“Yeah, I expected that,” Harry snaps. He will not look at Severus whilst he defends his godson. Harry can understand it, of course Severus loves Draco, but it doesn’t mean he has to like it. Instead, he keeps his hand over his eyes and tells himself, very firmly, *do not fucking cry*.

“Why did you expect it?”

“Because he’s your *godson*,” Harry spits out the word.

“That is not the reason,” Severus’ voice is much softer than Harry expected it to be. “If I could behave as I wished, I would punish him with the appropriate means allowed to Hogwarts staff. But if I punish Draco, I fear that his father will ask questions. If I reveal the reasons behind his punishment, it is possible that the Dark Lord will kill Draco for ... assaulting you.”

Harry winces. There’s a word he hates. *Assault*. He can’t help but think about Sirius again. *Sirius would have wanted to kill Malfoy for this. Sirius would have given him to Voldemort quite happily.*

“So it *is* because he’s your godson,” Harry mutters bitterly. “You don’t want him to die.”

“It is true that I do not want him to die but I also have other concerns.” Harry can just tell from the sound of Severus’ robes rustling and his voice that he’s moved to sit on the coffee table beside Harry. He still won’t look at him. “I fear that if word of the incident spreads abroad and if the Dark Lord were to see the incident in Draco’s memories, he would see more than we want him to.”

“Like what?”

“He may find your ... docility interesting,” Severus says carefully.

“I was *not* docile!” Harrison whips his head to glare at Severus. “I tried not to hurt him.”

“You froze, Harrison,” Severus’ voice is impossibly gentle, his face as tender as it gets. It makes Harry want to cry again and his eyes sting with it so he twists his face away again and drops his hand over his eyes once more. “That is absolutely natural, especially given what the blood magic precipitates in you.”

“You know about that?” Harry mutters.

“Theodore explained,” Severus goes on. “Your response was logical and consequential but the Dark Lord, however, might find your reaction ... alluring.”

Alluring. Harry knows exactly what that means and he’s very glad that he has a mint to suck on to fight back the nausea.

“A cat,” Harry bites out. “It’s like you said that time, he’s like a cat, he sees a bird with a limp and -,”

“He wants to play. To torture. He finds it amusing, yes.”

Jesus fucking Christ, Harry thinks bleakly. Will I ever get away from psychopaths who think torturing me is hilariously fun?

“You don’t want to give him ideas of what he could do to me if I were frozen,” Harry swallows hard and nods. “Okay.”

“There is also Theodore to consider,” Severus goes on. “Draco probably did not notice how Theodore moved before Zabini, but the Dark Lord certainly would. So we must ... minimise the impact of this event and ensure Draco’s silence. It will not save the situation if the Dark Lord decides to plunder his mind, but Narcissa and I perceive that to be unlikely if we do not escalate.”

“Fine.” Harry bites out, feeling the necessary injustice of it pushing down on him from all sides. He will not look at Severus. He will not cry. He will not feel anything. “Don’t punish him. He lives, I don’t get raped by Voldemort and no one knows Theo loves me. Fine. I don’t fucking *care* so can we stop *talking* about it?”

Harry hates how his voice breaks on the last word. He bites his lip and thinks, fiercely, *I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care.*

“*Farzandam,*” Severus says quietly. “He will never touch you again.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry keeps his eyes tightly closed but a trickle of a tear leaks out and he fights the urge to sniff. He will not sniff in front of Severus. “Seems pretty unlikely. He said he’s going to tell everyone that I *liked it.*”

“I have ensured that will not happen. Narcissa has ensured it. He will tell no one what happened,” Severus’ voice is soft. “He will never touch you again.”

There’s something in his tone, the quiet solidity of his promises that calms something inside Harry. He opens his eyes and looks at his Sire, wanting to believe him. There’s an expression on his face that Harry recognises from after Petunia. Ferocious and dangerous.

“You’re mad,” Harry whispers.

“I am,” Severus says flatly.

“At me?”

“No.” It’s a sign of how much he is used to Severus that he can see the barely concealed rage under the surface and knows where it is directed. “I am dissatisfied with how I have handled the situation. I regret not calling Lupin through immediately. I regret allowing you to leave my office alone. My anger is for my own actions.”

“I get it,” Harry sighs, closing his eyes again. “He’s your godson and I’m ...” *nothing*. “I get it.”

“Understand this, Harrison, if things were not as they were, then he would be serving the maximum punishment this school offers for students who commit this kind of misdemeanour,” Severus says quietly. Harry believes him, Harry believes Draco would get the fucking worst detentions imaginable, but these words aren’t comforting, just irritating, because they make Harry realise how much he wants something he can never have: *fairness*.

“But things are as they are,” Harry can’t stop his voice from being harsh. “He’s a Death Eater, you’re a spy, I’m me and Theo’s a Nott and this is a war. It’s not fair.”

“Yes,” Severus says. “War is never fair.”

Sometimes, Severus’ frankness takes the breath out of Harry but he still can’t stop being grateful. *He doesn’t lie to me*. Harry can’t stop sniffing this time. He closes his eyes and turns his face away. Harry is surprised when suddenly, he feels a pull on his Prince tether. He opens one eye and looks down at where his hand rests on the sofa. Severus has placed his hand with his Prince ring nearby it. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that Harry feels the tension between them. Harry blinks and takes a shuddering breath. Slowly, he reaches out and touches Severus’ ring, rubbing the stone and feeling the deep silence inside it. It’s calming. Severus very gently grasps his fingers, loose enough so Harry can pull away. That’s comforting too. Even now, Severus is always respectful about touching him. Today, that feels like the most important thing in the world.

“But Harrison,” Severus says slowly. “This fact does not mean I am diminishing what has happened to you today. I am sorry if at any point today I have given you reason to think otherwise.”

Harry believes him. Severus’ stillness and Severus’ measured tone, all of it tells Harry one thing: Severus is using a fucking ocean of occlumency to control his rage, just like he did in Dumbledore’s office.

“I’m sorry too,” Harry whispers, because he is sorry, so fucking sorry, and if he can’t apologise to Daphne right now, if she won’t stand to be in the same room as him, then he’ll just have to apologise to Severus. “I ... shouldn’t have compelled Daphne, I should have found a different way to help her and I ... shouldn’t have kept hitting Draco after he was - wasn’t touching me. He can’t hit me back it wasn’t ... right. And ...” Harry takes a deep breath. “Doing the wrong thing for the right reasons isn’t ... good.”

Harry thinks it sounds pretty pathetic, but at least it’s honest. Severus gives him a long, considered look.

“That is true. But the truth of all those facts does not diminish the truth of this,” Severus goes on quietly. “Today, you did show self control. As much as you could bear to, under the circumstances, and it would be remiss of me not to recognise it.”

He didn’t realise how much he needed to hear this from Severus until this very moment. Severus is right. He did a bad thing, a really bad thing but he also did something right, too.

He didn't get everything right, but he got *something* right. Harry gulps hard and finds himself gripping Severus' hand without realising, letting some of the despair of the day out through his fingers. There might be sparks, Harry can't tell, but Severus doesn't pull away. *Severus wouldn't ever pull away*, Harry finds himself thinking but then quickly drowns that thought in the lake inside his mind because it's too weird.

"I just ... it sucks that I have to live with him," Harry mutters, thinking of climbing into bed beside Theo knowing that Draco is nearby. It makes his skin crawl. "After everything."

"I think we should consider moving you back to Gryffindor," Severus says. Harry sits up abruptly, dropping Severus' hand.

"You're serious?" Harry stares. "What about Theo?"

"I know that you and Theodore have your ways of moving around the castle," Severus says evenly. "Removing you from Draco's orbit seems prudent."

"But ... the Gryffindors hate me."

"You have friends there too." Severus reminds him softly. "Besides, you are still unsorted, you can spend time in the Slytherin common room if you wish. Alternatively, you can take Mr Zabini into the Gryffindor common room. You can even spend time here, discreetly, you have your floo powder still. You can sleep here every night if you prefer."

"On the sofa?" Harry snorts.

"There is a spare bedroom," Severus continues, gesturing to the door behind him. It's the first Harry's heard of it but something in his chest clenches at the offer.

"You'd let me do that?" Harry swallows. "Isn't that risky?"

"Not if you use your magic to return to a dormitory before anyone could notice," Severus' voice is unbelievably calm.

"It still sounds risky."

"It is my risk to take," Severus folds his hands. Harry looks at the Prince ring on his finger and suddenly wishes that he was touching it again. There's an ocean of silence inside it, sometimes calm and sometimes furious. Always safe. "My priority is to keep you as safe as possible, Harrison. If you elucidate what you need to feel safe, I will enable it."

Harry stares at him. He believes him. Severus fucked up earlier today but he's said sorry and Harry believes him because Severus doesn't lie to him. *Does he lie to Draco?* Harry knows he rationally has no reason *not* to believe Severus, but he still can't stop himself from testing it.

"Even if I need to leave?" Harry whispers. *He won't let me, he doesn't mean it.* He remembers what Theo said when they made up in Privet Drive and had their big discussion about trust. "*You don't trust them to respect your decisions. You expect adults to try and control you.*"

“Then you will go to Venice,” Severus says promptly and Harry feels his chest tightening again. He absolutely will not cry in front of Severus. “I will enable it.”

Harry stares at his Sire. Sahara told him to listen and he is listening, but he feels like he’s missing the real answer somewhere. Maybe because he hasn’t asked the real questions (*What if I asked you to leave with me? What if I asked that we disappear with Remus?*) but he can’t make himself form the words. He’s not even sure he wants to leave the castle. It would feel like retreating from Malfoy and he won’t give him that, not to mention running away from Daphne’s anger. He owes her better than that.

“I don’t want to leave and go to Venice, not really, I’m not running away.” Harry sighs heavily. “I ... I’ll go to Gryffindor for a bit. I can ... Kreacher can move Theo if I ... need someone to help me sleep.”

Harry isn’t sure that he’ll sleep tonight. He’s not sure he’ll feel like sleeping ever again. When he looks at Severus, it’s like Severus has followed his thoughts even without looking into his eyes.

“I will give you a detention,” Severus says softly. “I want you to come here tonight. You can sleep in the spare room or on the sofa, whatever suits you.”

Harry actually doesn’t mind the sofa. When he slept here at the start of term it was sort of comforting, especially when he had nightmares, to wake to the smell of Severus’ cloak over him and to feel Severus’ dry hand against his forehead. *Wake up, farzandam. I am here.* It’s different to waking up in Theo’s arms, but still comforting, just in a different way.

“Why?” Harry asks wearily.

“I shall call Lupin. He shall come through.”

“I thought he could only do that in emergencies,” Harry says. “On rare occasions.”

“I believe this fits both descriptors.”

“Why?”

“Because you are hurting,” Severus says simply.

“That’s hardly rare,” Harry scoffs.

“Yet I find it to be entirely emergent.”

Severus’ eyes are dark and look exactly how they look in the nothing-place. For some reason, Harry suddenly longs for that place where he and Severus can be just as they are, completely alone. *No Draco, no godfathers, just us.*

“You’re worried about the edges,” Harry says.

Severus looks at him, his expression a subtle mix of stern and concerned.

“I always worry about you.”

Harry swallows hard. Sometimes, the things Severus says just knock the wind out of him. It’s like there’s a script they follow and suddenly, Severus diverges and Harry has no idea what to do. *He’s always thinking about me.*

There’s a bitter, cold, drowned part of Harry that wants to tell Severus to fuck off, that he can shove his worry wherever he keeps his conviction that his godson isn’t an utter wanker, but the promise of Remus, of hugs and company and getting to spend time with Remus and Severus together without any of the other shit is too much of lure. He wants to be ordinary, he wants to spend time with just the two of them in their stupid little unit. Besides, Severus has said sorry and Harry can’t be mad at him for loving his godson. Harry won’t be mad at him for that, not after last year, when Harry did so fucking much out of love for Sirius and Severus was there every step of the way.

Godfathers and Godsons, Harry thinks drearily. *The things we fucking do.*

“Fine. I’ll be here,” Harry nods and stands up. He can’t handle Severus’ gentleness right now, all it makes him want to do is weep and he can’t cry anymore. “I’m going to find Theo.”

“He’s in the dormitory,” Severus says quietly. Harry nods again. The bond in his chest is suddenly aching for Theo and nothing else will do. *Theo’s pulling*, Harry realises. *He needs to know I’m okay.* “Why did you not tell me you have the Peverell magic?” Severus asks.

“Because Griphook told me they’re dangerous,” Harry sighs, leaning his hand on the back of the sofa. “They were necromancers. He warned me about what could happen to me if people thought ... well, more of what they think now.”

Harry shakes his head derisively. Severus doesn’t move.

“However dangerous a secret might be, Harrison, I would still prefer to have it,” Severus’ voice is steady. “Albus will wish you to focus on the Peverell legacy. You must not.”

“Fine. It’s not really the type of magic that *does* anything, to be honest. It’s kind of quiet. Kind of shy.”

“Whatever Albus says about you being ...” Severus grimaces, “The *Peverell heir*, we want it to stay that way. Quiet.”

Harry’s not surprised that Dumbledore’s been talking to Severus about the ring. After all, he was the one who showed up in the garden of Spinners End, dying from the curse. Still, Harry hesitates at the secret door out to the corridor.

“Dumbledore told me something too,” he says, swallowing hard. “In the first lesson we had. Something about you.”

“What did he say?” Severus’ eyes flash dark as if he knows he won’t like what comes.

“He said ... that you and Mum didn’t love each other,” Harry stares down at his shoes. “When you ... y’know. Made me.”

“He lied,” Severus’ face is ferocious, his hands clenched into fists. Harry nods.

“I thought he did,” Harry mutters. “I just ... wanted to check.”

Because if you didn’t love her, then there is no chance in fucking hell you’ll ever love me.

“We loved one another, perhaps too much,” Severus’ face twists for a moment into something that looks like a painful mix of fondness and sadness. “She was the most precious person in my life.”

“Is she still?” Harry feels his throat tightening. Severus gives him a steady look. “Your most ... precious person?”

“No, *farzandam*,” he says slowly. Harry feels a twinge in the invisible tether between them.

Is it me? Is it Draco? Am I precious to you? Harry refuses to ask, but something in Severus’ gaze makes him feel a little better. Harry remembers what Magus said to him when he got on the Hogwarts Express: *Family bonds, Harry. Trust them.* He wonders what would happen if he told Severus that he is Harry’s third family bond. Would it matter to him? Would he even care?

Tell him. Tell him. Tell him.

Harry can’t form the words. After today, if he saw in Severus’ eyes that he doesn’t *want* to be Harry’s third family bond, that would be too much. He won’t risk it. He wants to keep Severus as he is now in Harry’s mind, flawed, yes, but his Sire. Severus belongs to Harry in some way he doesn’t understand quite, but in a way that matters and above all, he’s this: the man who says sorry. He remembers Sahara’s words: *listen to what is said and unsaid.* He nods and opens the door.

“Okay then,” Harry says, and he goes to look for Theo, feeling a bit better because even if he doesn’t have Severus the same way Draco does, he still has him. What is unsaid will have to do.

Chapter End Notes

There are many examples throughout history where a culture of war produces a cultural distaste and moral bias against certain weapons or actions. For example, in Great Britain, after the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Massacre, (which inadvertently, on the historical time line, took place when Harry was experiencing his cruellest month with Umbridge in THttHoP part 1) caused national dismay and outcry across my country and led to stricter gun control. That’s just one loose example of how a violent event might change a nation’s social perspective on something. I hope that provides additional insight for how wixen society in the world I have built has responded to compulsions in their postwar years.

If you are a person who has lived through conflict, who has developed understandable cultural triggers about situations or weapons because of it, I hope you know that your journey is valid. I hope you know you are seen and valued.

If you have experienced sexual assault, if you are struggling with processing your own trauma in this area, you are not alone. What happened to you does not deserve to be diminished or dismissed. You are a survivor. You are worthy of seeking help.

<https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>

If you do not have personal experience of the type of trauma that is discussed in this chapter, please remember that there are people reading this story and reading the comments who do. Let's ensure that the comment space is a safe space for our friends and survivors.

Do Not Go Gentle

Chapter Notes

Whew! Wow, everyone has feelings.

Dear friends, take care of yourselves. This is a book that explores the ins and outs of trauma with highly imperfect people. It's easy to get caught up, to feel the feelings of the characters, that might be your jam but please handle yourselves wisely.

Harry and everyone around him still have some processing and growing to do, so BONUS chapter tomorrow. Harry manages his own mental health fall out and finally speaks with Daphne. So if you've waited until now to read, if you can bear to make it one more chapter, you might feel more relief once the 'Hogsmeade episode' is behind them! Your choice.

Remember, this story is about TRAUMA. Read the tags. Pay attention to the tags. But since there isn't a tag for this, consider this your "REFERENCES TO RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR AGAINST WOMEN." tag. It is relevant for this chapter and tomorrow's chapter. Read the endnotes. And remember: this is a long book. Dark things happen. But there's a handful of happy endings coming. If you have the patience and the belief that, above anything, people can change.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Theo sits at the end of Blaise's bed, glaring at him. They are still tethered by the Zabini magic around his wrist and Theo knows better than to pull away. Blaise is ignoring him entirely and reading a book.

"So," Blaise doesn't take his eyes off the page. "Rosier calls you by your first name."

"So what?" Theo snaps.

"So it's an obvious power play to remind you of your familiarity with the Death Eaters and your past with Apollonius." Blaise raises an eyebrow and turns a page. "Is all of Donne's poetry so sexual?"

"Generally, yes, why are you even reading it?" Theo demands. He doesn't want to think about Felix Rosier at the moment. All he wants is Harry.

"Because one of the easiest ways to communicate with Harry when he is in the fall out of a trauma is through poetry," Blaise shrugs. The words hit Theo in the chest. *A trauma. Draco tried to assault Harry. It's another trauma.*

“Because he hasn’t had enough of those,” Theo rubs his face with his hand. “I should kill him.”

“Harry? That would be counterproductive.”

“*Draco*,” Theo snarls. It feels excellent to put words to the venom currently coursing through his heart, fed by the indignance in the bond. “I want him *dead*. I want to crucio him to *dust*.”

“And of course, Professor Snape’s concerns were totally unfounded,” Blaise rolls his eyes. “Focus your desires on more productive means.”

“Like what?”

“Like caring for Harry,” Blaise says. “Like preparing for Rosier’s inevitable attack on you. Like supporting Daphne. Do you need more? I can give you many more courses of action that are necessary and not based on impractical revenge.”

“How would you feel if it was Daphne who had been kissed without her consent by an enemy?” Theo demands. “Or Fred Weasley?”

“I would feel much as you do,” Blaise says, his eyes glowing redder for a moment. “And you would be by my side to remind me that whilst revenge is delicious, it is a dish best served thoughtfully and slowly and without repercussions to the chef.”

Theo takes a deep breath. Blaise gives him a long look.

"It was terrible," Blaise says quietly. "I feel much as you do right now, but I am trying to consider the matter from all sides and above all, in the context of an entire potential war."

"Your mother's son, always," Theo mutters.

"If I were not, perhaps I would be as you are, longing to curse the person who has hurt the person I love," Blaise says quietly. Theo opens his mouth but Blaise shakes his head. "I know it is different. Draco intended to assault Harry and Harry was attempting to protect Daphne but it doesn't change her hurt. Or how painful it is to see it. So bearing all of that in mind, what more productive course of action would you like to consider?"

Theo sighs heavily and closes his eyes, remembering the sheer bloody panic he had felt when he saw Daphne fall under the compulsion, the confusing conflicts of different worries: worry for Daphne, worry for Blaise, worry for Harry, his own frustration that Daphne was the one who had the necklace and the one under Harry's compulsion. His own fear, deep down, that Harry will not be able to learn to control the compulsions, worry of what that will *mean*. Then he felt it, the terror in the bond, and all thoughts of Daphne had flown from his head because of what Draco did to Harry. It's as if his mind could only deal with one attack against the people he loved at a time and now, he is full to the brim with hatred for Draco Malfoy. As far as Theo sees it, underneath Harry's mistakes, there is Draco's betrayal. Draco, who was supposed to be Daphne's ally if not friend all these years. Draco, who always finds a way to make life fucking *difficult*. Resentment is easier to process than fear, Theo thinks. But Blaise is right and of course, he knows he cannot curse Draco. He's the son of the Minister for

Magic and the moment Theo raises a wand to him, he exposes the truth of his allegiance to Harry. *Heart be the bolder*, Theo tells himself. *Learn, scheme, and defend*.

“Okay,” Theo leans back on his hands and stares over at his own bed. *Harry and I should have stayed there this morning*. He pushes that thought away. He cannot help Daphne like Blaise or Granger can and Harry isn’t here to be cared for. “Rosier then.”

“His agenda is clear,” Blaise says, closing the book.

“Recruitment,” Theo nods, thinking of little Hilary Lee.

“And to rival you.”

“I think you mean *you*,” Theo snorts. Blaise shakes his head.

“I am not the son of a Death Eater,” Blaise says quietly. “I am not British, either. I am European and this is not yet my people’s war. You, on the other hand, are a Lord Apparent with a Death Eater father and you are defying the political circumstance of your inheritance by straying to neutral.”

“Straying to neutral,” Theo shakes his head. It’s the oddest phrasing of ‘falling in love with the Boy-Who-Lived’ that he’s ever heard.

“Yes,” Blaise says. “If you came out as an ally of Dumbledore, you would be less dangerous. The Dark Lord and Minister Malfoy could want you dead and have done with it. There’s a reason that as long as the Dark Lord wants to continue the pretence of democracy in England, it is Lord Greengrass’ neutral faction and not Dumbledore’s resistance that presents the biggest challenge. Come December, you will be the only Slytherin student who is also a neutral Lord. You are the biggest threat to the Junior Death Eaters at Hogwarts, not Harry.”

Oddly, Theo thinks of how Merlin and Morgana fought and lived together and everything he’s read about them. *Morgana fought politically, Merlin fought magically*.

“Whilst that might be true at the moment, if the Dark Lord achieves a majority in the Wizengamot then it will not matter. Then being neutral will be just as bad as being an enemy,” Theo muses.

“The Dark Lord cannot achieve a majority unless Dumbledore is dead and the Light faction crumbles,” Blaise raises his eyebrows. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“What I mean is, it is not enough to gather heirs,” Theo says, diverting the question. “I need to think about my position as a Lord from December.”

“Yes, you do, or there will be no use for you whatsoever,” Blaise cheerfully, returning to his book.

“Comforting,” Theo drawls, but it is a helpful distraction. *I must consider my allies, I need to look at what votes are ongoing, and how I can position myself with Lord Greengrass*. Most urgently, Theo imagines writing to Narcissa will be essential.

“At some point, we also need to discuss the fact that Harry can wordlessly cast compulsions,” Blaise turns another page. Theo stiffens. He can’t discuss that with Blaise and Blaise seems to notice, because he lifts his eyes to stare at Theo before continuing. “I will not ask questions. A Necromancer has skills beyond others and I already know he had four heirships, I would not be shocked if he had found a way to have them returned to him. I am not *surprised* by the development, but we need to discuss how we are going to manage it. He cannot walk around showing this type of dark art in school. I cannot imagine the headmaster will approve.”

“No kidding,” Theo mutters, then gives his friend a suspicious look. “You really won’t ask questions?”

“I will only ask questions if it is something I need to know in order to protect you,” Blaise says evenly. “You are the Consort, I am the Shield.”

“And what questions do you need to ask in order to protect me?”

Blaise gives him a long look.

"Do you believe he can control it?"

Theo feels his stomach drop. *I don't know*. Before Theo can answer, the door opens and Harry walks in. His eyes are red-rimmed behind his glasses and when their eyes meet, Theo feels the tightness in his chest increasing, the bond inside him yearning for Harry’s touch, to have him near and to know he’s safe.

“You can untether him, Blaise, he’s not going to hurt Malfoy,” Harry says, looking exhausted as he sits down beside Theo, but it helps. The ache in his chest lessens slightly. Harry must be feeling the same because he rubs his chest, the exact same spot where Theo is sore.

“Why am I not going to hurt him?” Theo asks. Harry doesn’t answer.

“Are you well, my Lord?” Blaise asks quietly, looking Harry up and down. “Draco should never have touched you like that.”

Harry flinches but recovers quickly.

“I’m moving to Gryffindor,” he says, clearly unable to stand Blaise’s pity. Both of Harry’s hands are trembling and Theo knows it can’t all be the tremors. “It’s just ... going to be best.”

“Very well,” Blaise nods. “We’ll make it work.”

They’ll have to, Theo realises. Theo fights a surge of rage. He forces it down, because he sees how Blaise’s unflappability is calming Harry. Theo will be calming too.

“How’s ... Daphne?” Harry asks awkwardly. He looks like he half expects Blaise to yell at him for what he did, but of course, he doesn’t.

“Sleeping,” Blaise shrugs easily. He doesn’t say the obvious; that Daphne might never speak to Harry again. *That’s tomorrow’s problem*, Theo thinks sadly.

“Okay.” Harry looks nervously towards the door. “You can go and hang out with her, Blaise. It’s fine. We’re fine.”

Blaise gives him a strange look, half frustration, half respect. Theo wonders if Harry’s done something in their bond to lessen Blaise’s burden. It’s the kind of thing he’d do.

“I will,” Blaise says quietly. “Thank you. Do not worry, my Lord. I can honour my vow and protect Daphne. You do not need to lighten the burden.”

“Okay,” Harry blinks back tears and nods, gratefully. His regret over compelling Daphne is abundantly clear. Theo is not sure it will be enough to reduce Daphne’s pain. “Thanks for ... not being mad. I - I never meant to hurt her and I’m ... really sorry.”

Blaise nods tautly.

“I told you, remember, that you cannot choose the path of the Necromancer without turmoil,” Blaise says softly. “You still have a lot to learn about how to bear the weight of your power. And when to hold back.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Harry says, sending Blaise a tight smile but Theo can see the pain in the tension of Harry’s body. “Can you leave Theo and me alone? Just for ten minutes?”

Theo wishes it could be longer but after what happened in Hogsmeade, everyone in Hogwarts is going to be hyper-aware of where the Potter-Black Lord Apparent is. Blaise squeezes Harry’s shoulder, nods and walks towards the door.

“Harry,” Theo begins.

“Wait,” Harry says curtly. As soon as Blaise closes the door behind him and Harry stretches out his hand towards it and a sparkling black shield erupts around the door. “Okay.”

“Why am I not going to hurt Draco?” Theo repeats quietly. Harry ignores him and walks back over to Theo’s bed, pulling Harry’s hidden pyjamas out from under Theo’s pillow. Theo follows slowly.

“Kreacher,” Harry calls softly and the elf appears. “Can you take my night stuff down to Severus’? I’m going to stay there tonight.”

“Yes Master,” Kreacher mutters, taking Harry’s pyjamas and disappearing.

“Can we talk about it?” Theo asks, trying to keep his voice level.

“Talk about what?” Harry mutters, pulling out some of his books from under Theo’s bed. Theo can’t help it, he knows why Harry’s pulling back and doesn’t want to talk about it, but there’s too much rage inside him to be silenced. Rage and pain, like a burn in the centre of his chest. He takes hold of Harry’s wrist, trying to stop him moving.

“I could feel it, Harry,” Theo says, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “I felt your pain, and then I *saw* it, I saw how he was - was *holding* you against the wall, it was worse than the time with Chang -,”

“Jesus, I hope it’s not a pattern,” Harry mutters, shrugging off his touch. “People fucking kissing me without asking -.”

“She might have been unaware but he wasn’t, he did it to *hurt* you -,”

“Theo,” Harry sits heavily on the bed with his back to the headboard. He presses his face into his hands. He can’t stop his voice from breaking pitifully over his words and Theo’s heart breaks with it. “Please just ... stop talking.”

Theo does. Harry takes a few deep breaths but it does seem to be enough for whatever turmoil is going on inside of him. His rune marks are glowing. His whole left hand is shimmering with white light and his right hand is sparking. *He’s close to needing a circuit breaker.* Slowly, Theo climbs onto the bed next to him and carefully takes hold of his hands, pulling them away from Harry’s face.

“Just ... take a deep breath,” Theo whispers. Harry sighs and rests his head back against the headboard, letting Theo hold his right hand, stroking the Peverell stone gently. The Slytherin magic inside it spits out green sparks that Theo catches in his fingertips without wincing. They aren’t Harry’s usual sparks, bright and playful, like tiny static charges. These are sharp and vicious, like hot sparks from a fire. Harry’s magic wants to hurt. *Let it hurt me then.* Slowly, Harry’s breathing becomes more settled. Then, in that wonderful way that it sometimes does, Theo hears Harry’s thoughts. Harry hears Theo’s thoughts even when he doesn’t necessarily want him to, if Theo’s standing close enough and his feelings are strong enough. In comparison, Theo rarely ever hears Harry’s thoughts unless he’s deliberately thinking them to him, pushing them gently through the bond for him to catch. When it’s not like that, on the rare occasion Harry’s feelings are strong enough, Theo feels like he’s trying to tune into a staticky radio, as if Harry’s thoughts are muddled by white noise. Yet if he concentrates he can catch a few on the edges of his mind: *Theo’s here. Theo loves me. Whatever happened, Theo loves me.*

Theo swallows. Harry doesn’t want him to talk so Theo won’t talk but if he concentrates, if he puts his will to it and holds his breath, he can send thoughts back through the bond and trust that Harry’s power will let him hear them, loud and clear.

I want to kill him for making you feel this way, Theo thinks.

Harry smiles and traces a pattern on the back of Theo’s hand.

You want to kill a lot of people these days.

Theo admits that might be true, but in this case, it feels completely reasonable.

A lot of stupid people deserve it.

Harry smirks and pinches the back of Theo’s hand playfully. Theo cannot help his relief.

Theodore Nott, slayer of stupid people.

Theo raises his eyebrows at Harry.

You tried to help her. You did a bad thing but are not a bad person.

Harry sighs and shakes his head.

How many times can I say that before I am a bad person?

Theo grips Harry's hand very tightly.

I don't care, he thinks furiously. Whoever you become, I don't care. I still love you.

Harry doesn't smile, his eyes becoming distant.

I love you too.

Theo knows there's more to say but there's a headache brewing under his nasal bridge and Theo knows why. They've never really done this, had a real conversation just inside the bond, behind the exchanging of a few thoughts. It takes an extraordinary amount of mental acuity on Theo's part and probably less but still a considerable concentration for Harry and Theo worries that Harry doesn't quite have the mind space for that right now. He reaches up and strokes Harry's face, hoping this last thought will be enough to prompt Harry into verbalising: *Tell me.*

Harry takes a deep breath and sighs, closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispers.

"What on earth are you sorry for?" Theo frowns.

"Everything, for Daphne, for Draco for ... everything."

"When it comes to Daphne, I'm not the person you need to say sorry to. I am not a woman," Theo says gently. "And you absolutely do not need to apologise for Draco."

"I baited him, I ... I let him ... do that," Harry winces. "I didn't want to hurt him, all of the stuff about Sanctuary and that -,"

"Harry," Theo strokes his face softly. "You tried to protect him, to protect the Sanctuary and protect Narcissa and Snape. He made a *choice* to hurt you."

"Big deal," Harry mutters, thumping his head back against the headboard repeatedly until Theo slides a hand up to the nape of his neck to stop him. "Everyone does that."

"Not like this," Theo shakes his head. It's different, Theo doesn't know quite why but Harry is anguished differently. Something has happened and Theo doesn't know how to put it into words.

Harry swallows hard. Then, suddenly, he's speaking and words are coming out that seem to surprise him and must ache to speak if his reticent expression is anything to go by, but in that typical Harry way, he forces them through.

"When ... when Umbridge did the thing with the super duper evil blood quill -,"

"Is that what we're calling it?" Theo smiles fondly.

"Yep," Harry tries to smile but he's breathing too sharply, his thin chest rising. "When she did that, something happened."

Theo tenses, feeling like he's been punched in the stomach. *I will not scare him off with my own fear.* So Theo utilises his mind shield. He lets it roar into burning life inside his mind, tucks his rage and fear behind it, and reaches for the quiet place inside of him that he accesses when he prays or meditates. *Odin, give me strength.* A calm descends and Theo is filled with peace. He turns Harry's wrist over, tracing the shape of his rune mark as it splinters up his arm.

"Tell me," Theo says softly. Harry's blinking back tears but he looks relieved, as if all he's been waiting for is to be asked.

"With Umbridge, I ... I went to this weird place in my head where everything was ... it's a place I go, or I used to go, to kind of cope with pain. It's like the cupboard, it's safe and small and I ... I say these rhymes to myself I learned when I was a kid," Harry grimaces as if embarrassed. Theo is not embarrassed for him. Theo is horrified because Theo knows exactly where that place is. It's at the end of Apollonius' beatings, at the end of his Aunt's cruelty. He's been to that place many times. "But when I'm there, it's like I'm not really here. Anything could happen and I just ... let it. That's what happened with Umbridge."

"What did she do?" Theo's voice is barely above a whisper. He's worried if he speaks louder, he will scream and not stop screaming ever again.

"She did the blood quill stuff and it really hurt and I was kind of ... drifty," Harry gulps at the air. "Then she took my jumper off, so everyone would see the blood through my shirt, she wanted me to walk through the halls like it, and I just ... I let her take my jumper off. If she had kept going, kept taking off my ..."

Harry's voice drifts. Theo knows, as with his own childhood, wishing it didn't happen does not make it disappear. Harry shakes himself and keeps going.

"When Malfoy, when he touched my rune, when I realised what was going to happen that he was going to kiss me and he wasn't - he wasn't going to stop, I just ... it was like that. Or like when Bellatrix had me in the cage. Or with Petunia."

Petunia. A named more dreaded than Umbridge.

"It all just made me feel so ..."

“Exposed,” Theo whispers. He doesn’t mean to put words in Harry’s mouth but he’s reminded of the time Apollonius beat him raw and bloody whilst fighting with a sword and shield. When the shield had splintered under Apollonius’ blow, the devastation and panic had been immediate. He’d been exposed to his father’s violence and helpless against it. Harry only nods gratefully.

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh. “So I’d just ... drift away. To where none of it mattered.”

“You felt like you needed to be still,” Theo’s voice is little more than a croak. “To survive.”

Harry brushes a tear off his cheek like it’s nothing. Theo notices there is ice around the fingernails of his left hand. The Black magic must be raging inside to produce that. Theo’s amazed he can hold it back and secretly, wildly impressed.

“That’s me,” Harry shakes his head derisively. “Fucking bundle of massive trauma, bloody *pathetic* .”

“You are not pathetic,” Theo says. “Not at all.”

“But ... I froze. *Again*.” Harry voice is desperate, his eyes glossy with tears. “You always fight.”

Theo shakes his head. How many times has that not been true? Apollonius raised him to fight, always, but there have been so many times he could barely move his own feet.

“Not with my Aunt,” Theo takes a sharp breath. He remembers her sneer after his mother’s death: *She died because of you! You poisoned her womb!* “It was so confusing at first, she blamed me for mother’s death, and I ... I couldn’t work out what I had done wrong. I thought she could have been right and it *was* my fault.”

“It wasn’t,” Harry says quickly.

“I know,” Theo squeezes his hand. “But I didn’t know what to do with her, Harry. Apollonius never beat me uselessly, he *taught* me to fight and he beat me until I could defend myself or beat him back, there were *rules*, it made *sense*, but this ...” Theo shakes his head, remembering his Aunt ripping him out of bed to slap him across the face, her drunken smirk so utterly baffling. “I ... never fought her back. It was the same as you said, she would hurt me and I would let her because ...”

“Because if you fought back it would be worse,” Harry finishes for him, nodding. Theo feels the tremendous relief of being completely understood. There’s no shame or guilt only the shared knowledge that survival mattered most. *It’s what we both did*, Theo thinks. *We survived*.

“Yes.” Theo lifts Harry’s wrist and presses the softest of kisses against the rune there. It tastes like magic, like electricity and sweat.

“Well, you *mostly* fight,” Harry sighs out a rattling breath.

“You mostly fight, too, Harry,” Theo says evenly. “Even when you can’t stand or walk, you fight with your words. You’re not pathetic. You are not weak.”

Harry takes a shuddering breath and turns, pushing his forehead against Theo’s shoulder. *I love you*, Theo thinks to him. *Nothing will change that.*

“Severus says that if Voldemort got hold of Draco’s memories, he’d get ideas,” he mutters into Theo’s jumper. Harry’s hair smells like rain and is still damp. Theo rubs his lips across it.

“About what?”

“He’s worried Voldemort will kill him for touching me.”

“I’m fine with that,” Theo says firmly. Behind his mind shield, the raging panther of his anger paces, growling to be set free. Harry snorts.

“Of course you are, but it’s to protect us too,” Harry elbows him. “You moved too quickly and I ... Severus thinks Tom will like it. The whole ... freezing thing.”

“He’ll see it as an opportunity,” Theo mutters. “For his own entertainment.”

The notion is utterly galling but Theo will never forget the way the Dark Lord looked at Harry in the Ministry of Magic: Obsession and *delight*, like a toy he would never tire of. Theo does not want to give the Dark Lord more opportunities to look at Harry that way.

“That’s a really nice way of putting it,” Harry smirks. “But yeah, so that’s why Draco can’t be punished and why Severus and Narcissa have warned him off me, apparently. So it doesn’t raise suspicion and Tom doesn’t get ideas.”

“Why he can’t be punished *officially*.” The great, stalking cat made of rage pauses on the other side of Theo’s mind-shield, its ears cocked with interest. “I have some ideas about this.”

“You can’t do anything, Theo,” Harry says sternly.

“I can’t,” Theo grins sharply. “Kreacher can.”

“Jesus,” Harry groans but Theo feels a lightening in the bond in his chest. Whatever Harry says, this idea makes him feel relieved, Theo can feel it. *It’s because Draco won’t get away with it*, Theo realises. *Not entirely*. “You can’t hurt him.”

“I’m not going to and neither are you. You’ll be in Gryffindor so it can’t be traced back to you. Besides, itching powder hardly counts as hurting,” Theo scoffs gently. “Does it?”

“I guess not,” Harry laughs softly and shakes his head. “Just don’t let Kreacher send him to St Mungo’s.”

“I would not waste precious hospital resources.”

“You’re so considerate.”

“I try, Potter.” Theo smiles at him and tentatively brushes Harry’s hair back from his face. Theo could sit here for the rest of his life, gently touching Harry, and need nothing more. “Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ... Can I kiss you?” Theo wants to, desperately, but not if it hurts him. “I don’t want to if ... if it’s going to be difficult.”

Harry hesitates for a moment but then shakes it off.

“Well, let’s do it and find out,” he grins.

“You are such a Gryffindor,” Theo smirks.

Harry leans closer.

“Kiss me. I dare you, Nott.”

“Gryffindors,” Theo brushes a thumb across Harry’s lip. “Honestly.”

Theo rolls his eyes dismissively, but he leans closer and presses his lips against Harry’s. It is tentative. It is perfect. It’s an utter relief to tumble with Harry through sweet blood magic, to feel Harry’s consolation in the bond, his words echoing through Theo’s mind: *This is how it’s supposed to be*. Theo gives into it, lets Harry soar deeper through the blood magic and suddenly Theo’s mind is filled with *them*, just the two of them, wrapped together that morning under the warm duvet, just lips and smiles and tangled limbs. Theo feels Harry’s joy creeping through him, safeness and gentleness and the pain inside his bond is finally eased, but it seems like Harry isn’t ready to stop. Theo doesn’t know how to explain it, but it’s like legilimency almost, if infinitely more pleasant, as if Harry’s magic is pushing through the bond, trying to flood him completely. Theo wants to let him. Theo’s only problem is he can’t breathe.

“Hurricane!” Theo gasps, and Harry reluctantly pulls away, pressing his forehead against Theo’s. Theo takes huge gulps of oxygen and melts against him, waiting for the dizziness to stop. The bond is blue and gold around them and Theo sighs, heavily.

“I’m not thinking about him,” Theo breathes, rubbing his nose against Harry’s cheek. “Only you, beloved.”

“*You’re mine,*” Harry has slipped into parseltongue. “*I’m yours. Nothing will change that. Ever.*”

“I know,” Theo strokes his hair softly. “You realise he can’t have been sending that package to you? Otherwise, Daphne would have just tried to give it to you.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighs. “Someone else is on his list. Or he had a more intricate plan.”

“We’ll work it out. We can talk about it after dinner.”

“I’m not going to dinner.”

“You have to eat something,” Theo frowns. He barely ate anything at lunch and then was sick.

“I’m going down to Severus’, I have a “detention” and Remus is coming through.”

Theo feels morose as Harry reluctantly climbs off him. The bond dissolves into the air and the dormitory seems suddenly dimmer and colder. Harry pulls the invisibility cloak out of Theo’s trunk and tucks it into his school satchel. His hair is tousled and his lips flushed. It’s very distracting. *So fucking gorgeous, should be actually illegal.* Harry leans forward, cupping Theo’s cheek with his hand. “I fucking love you.”

“Poetic.” Theo smiles. He grabs the back of Harry’s neck and pulls their foreheads together. Theo feels like there’s a small sun inside his chest and when he closes his eyes and imagines it, it’s burning gold. *Like Harry.* “I fucking love you too, Harrison Prince.”

Harry kisses him softly on the lips.

“Later, Nott,” Harry says, slowly disappearing into nothingness as he presses his hand against the dormitory wall and the Slytherin magic dissolves him. Theo has a sensation suddenly, that the world is moving around him, too fast to stop. All he can do is sit in it, whilst the boy he loves is assaulted, whilst the boy who did it gets away with it, whilst Rosier amasses followers and threatens younger children and all the while, somewhere in the world, the Dark Lord goes on living. It feels to Theo like all he has done since Harry was kidnapped is be swept along in the terribleness of the world, the cruel unpredictability of war as it builds around him, threatening everyone he loves and he cannot *stop* it. So here he sits, just like Harry, assailed by memories of the past, of his own frightened childhood, of those nights hiding under duvets trying not to cry when he heard his Aunt’s footsteps, of swallowing his tears when Apollonius beat him black and blue for combat training. For too long, Theo has watched and Theo has waited.

I will not do this any longer.

Harry sees him as a person who always fights but Theo feels like all he has done, his whole life, is freeze. He’s been a block of ice, cut and shaped by Apollonius into whatever he wanted and since his death Theo’s been cut loose at sea, drifting. Without aim except survival and following Harry and fearful of where the future might take them. Theo remembers what Narcissa wrote to him in the summer about his own power and Harry’s when he spoke to her of consorts. *Was one more powerful than the other or were they simply different in their power?* Theo might not be a Mage, he might not be a Lord apparent twice over and able to compel Draco Malfoy and utilise magic that can open dimensions but he is not powerless, he has his knife and his wand and his mind and besides that, he is a Lord alone. His future is his own and can only be forged by him. He has a sudden memory of standing beside his mother’s bedside before she died, a memory he has long forgotten.

“You are powerful, Theodore,” she whispers. “And privileged. Learn how to use both to be a good man.”

"I don't know how to do that," Theo whimpers, clutching her pale hands. He is not even eight years old.

"You have a fierce mind, my darling," she strokes her thumb across the back of his hand. "Never doubt its strength."

"Theo?" Theo looks up and Blaise has stuck his head around the doorframe, frowning. "Are you well? You've got that look."

"What look?"

"Like the one before you stabbed Chambers," Blaise closes the door behind him. "Do I need to tie you up again?"

"No," Theo reaches slowly for his notebook. "Come here."

"Why?" Blaise steps cautiously closer. "You're not going to knock me out and try to murder Draco, are you?"

"No, I have someone for that," Theo smiles. "Kreacher!"

Kreacher pops into the room.

"*Santa Diana*, not again," Blaise moans.

"Heir Nott calls?" Kreacher says, wiping his hands on a tea towel.

"And once again, are we not going to discuss why a *Black elf* responds to you like you're his Master?" Blaise mutters.

"Yes, I did," Theo says, ignoring Blaise. "Kreacher, Malfoy's yours."

"Kreacher's?" Kreacher's ears perk up and then he scowls. "To do what with?"

"To punish," Theo says. Kreacher's grin is a sunrise of malevolence dawning over his face. "For his actions against your Master."

"It never ends," Blaise leans against Theo's bedpost with a sigh. "But I suppose it is better than you trying to kill Malfoy yourself."

"Kreacher can *murder* Malfoy heir?" Kreacher looks like all his Yules have come early.

"No, you cannot," Theo says. "Harry was specific, you cannot murder him or send him to St Mungo's. But you can, very subtly, make his life very *very* uncomfortable."

"Oh yes!" Kreacher cackles. "Kreacher can!"

Kreacher pops away. Blaise shakes his head.

"You know, that's the first time I've ever seen that elf *not* demanding a bribe of some kind," he says.

"Yeah, well, tactical sabotage is its own reward," Theo reaches for a new biro that he stole from Harry and turns past his many, many pages of lists to a fresh page. "Sit down."

"Why?" Blaise frowns. Before Theo can answer, the door opens. Daphne stands there. Both Blaise and Theo stare at her. Her eyes are puffy from crying and her back is stiff, as if she is still trying to shake off the lingering sense of being unable to move. Theo looks at Blaise but he is only watching her, carefully, and from that Theo infers that they are waiting on Daphne. Whatever she wants to do, whatever she wants to say, the first move is hers to make. Her eyes drift from Blaise's face to Theo's and then down to his notebook. A small spark appears in them.

"Are you doing homework?" she asks softly, stepping into the room and closing the door behind her. With that, Theo understands that the very last thing Daphne wants to do is talk about it. Harry might be his beloved but Daphne is one of his dearest friends. He will help her cope in whatever way she needs to.

"No, we're making a plan to deal with Rosier," Theo says. Daphne sits down on the bed beside him.

"Without Harry?" she asks. Theo stiffens. Daphne doesn't look up at him and when Theo catches Blaise's eye, he's frowning. Daphne carries on speaking. "I don't want to talk about it or speak to him but I won't pretend that we don't all have treaties with him and," she sniffs and gives Theo a sideways look, "bonds."

"Your vow has not ... altered?" Theo asks quietly. He had worried, privately, that it would. That Harry would have broken his no-wands treaty with Daphne (even without a wand).

"No," Daphne sniffs. "I think because he did not ... intend to harm me."

Her voice is like painstripper on the word 'intend.' Theo knows that for a girl like Daphne, who spends so much of her mental energy controlling and monitoring herself out of necessity, the idea that Harry just flung magic he didn't understand around unintentionally will be incredibly hurtful. *Even without everything that compulsions mean for women*, Theo thinks sadly.

"You must not hide things from me, either of you." Daphne looks at them both severely, eyes a little glassy. "You must swear."

"We swear, *tesoro mio*," Blaise says softly. Theo nods. Daphne will always be like this, he realises, whatever the difficulty she faces. She will always want to know what is going on, even if it is personally challenging.

"We're doing this without him because this isn't Harry's fight," Theo says, picking up the conversation and thinking of Rosier's smug smile. "Harry hasn't been a Slytherin all this time. He doesn't know these people like we do. This is my fight."

"Our fight," Daphne corrects him firmly. She takes the pen and notebook from him and in her actions, Theo sees something familiar. Just like him, Daphne needs to be doing something. "What do we call it?"

"Fuck Rosier?" Blaise jokes.

"He might take that as an invitation," Daphne mutters and Blaise snorts with laughter, sitting down on her other side and wrapping an arm around her.

"*Amore mio*," he says, fondly kissing the top of Daphne's head. She tuts and pushes him away but Theo sees the way her shoulders soften. It's doing her good, Theo realises, to be around them, people who make her feel safe and normal.

"This is what we'll call it," Theo says, writing the words *Operation Alleanza* at the top of the page. It makes him think of *Operation Infiltration* from the first summer he met Harry. He smiles and shows it to them both. Blaise laughs and Daphne looks at it for a long moment, her brown eyes steady and thankfully, no longer grey and misty as they were in Hogsmeade.

"Why now?" she asks softly. Theo knows what she means. Why now, so far into the term? Why, at this moment, has he chosen to rally them? He also wonders if there is a hint of curious accusation underneath it: *is it because the boy you loved did something terrible to me and you want to make up for it?*

"Was it my excellent pep talk?" Blaise jokes and then turns to Daphne. "I gave him an excellent pep talk to stop him killing Draco."

"No, it wasn't," Theo takes the pen from Daphne and underlines the heading. As he does, he feels, for the first time since he got on the Hogwarts Express and Harry got fake engaged to Blaise, like he is finally in control. "It's because I am *not* waiting for the fight to come to me."

Warriors do not dither, they strike, Apollonius whispers in his mind. Theo agrees. He will scheme, he will defend, he will find a way to strike back against Rosier.

"*Sono d'accordo*," Blaise grins widely.

"You ... want to find a way to strike back against Rosier before he can manipulate members of our house," Daphne says slowly, nodding.

"We will get Hilary Lee a treaty," Theo says firmly. "With Blaise, ideally, but if not then with you, Daphne. Then we need to get the other neutral Slytherins."

"Get them to do what?" Blaise asks.

"Stay neutral," Theo says, taking the notebook and quickly beginning to write a list of every Slytherin from a neutral house he knows and all the Slytherins from families without Wizengamot seats who have no connections to the Death Eaters. Daphne clicks her teeth and snatches it back once she realises what he's doing, finishing the list for him.

"Your handwriting is illegible," she mutters whilst Blaise smirks.

"We'll get as many as we can to get a no-wands treaty with you, Daph," Theo goes on. Daphne nods as she writes. "Lord Greengrass is the strongest hold of the neutral faction, anyone who has a no-wands treaty with the House of Greengrass will never fall in with

Rosier and the more we get the stronger we will seem. We could even use Shafiq, even if a Slytherin swears a no-wands with the House of Shafiq, that will cut them off from being recruited by Rosier."

"Or if they swore to you," Blaise says quietly.

"They won't swear to me, not yet, I have not been able to do anything to prove my house as truly neutral," Theo shakes his head.

"Except stand by Harry and Longbottom's side at the Wizengamot," Daphne says, not looking up from her list. "I think you will be surprised by how convincing that was."

"Actions speak louder than words, and until I can reverse Apollonius' voting record on muggleborn rights, the statute of secrecy, Creature classifications and education reform then I cannot *prove* that I am different," Theo says. He is not like Harry and Longbottom. When they speak, they both have a history of light families or, in Harry's case, personal duels with the Dark Lord to back up their claims to be who they are. Theo has nothing to prove he is truly not a pureblood supremacist. His father was a disgraced Death Eater. He has enough work to do moving the House of Nott into neutral waters but that doesn't mean he cannot ensure the neutral block in Slytherin remains undamaged from behind the scenes. Daphne pauses and looks up.

"You intend to change *all* of your Apollonius' voting records?" she says softly. "Every one?"

Theo nods. Apollonius voting record reflects his belief that even if the Dark Lord never came back, the Dark faction that valued pureblood life over all else, should maintain its stronghold by voting together. That often meant voting with those powerful Lords who led it, like Lord Malfoy and Lord Selwyn, even on issues that Theo is sure Apollonius held less inflammatory views. Thus, Apollonius' voting record reflects the passing of some of the worst legislation around the education of muggleborns, the treatment of Creatures, and the colonialisation of non-British artefacts. They do not reflect Theo's beliefs and for the first time he realises that since Apollonius is dead, Theo's opinions do not need to reflect the last Lord Nott's. *I never need to fear not falling in line behind him again.*

"That will certainly make an impact," Blaise says quietly.

"I don't doubt it," Theo says drily, thinking of Rosier. He taps his finger against Daphne's list. "But until then, getting Slytherins to align with the children of neutral Lords will work, if we are subtle and smart about it."

"Subtle and smart, very much how I would describe you in bed," Blaise says, and Theo can't help but snort with laughter.

"Smart, perhaps, but I do not recall much subtlety," Daphne sniffs and that only makes Theo laugh out loud. Blaise grins mischevously. It feels good, he realises, to be planning with his friends.

"I think we can do this," Theo says. Daphne nods firmly.

"Tremblay needs to be stopped," she says, squeezing Blaise's hand affectionately. "And I too, see the value of taking the fight forward. If this is what war will be like, I want to be ... ready."

Blaise squeezes her close and murmurs something in Italian in her ear that makes her quickly turn and press a kiss to his cheek. Then Blaise smiles up at Theo with a light shrug.

"I follow where you lead, Consort."

"Not consort," Theo says. Blaise raises an eyebrow. Daphne stiffens. "I mean, not *just* Consort. Not in this."

"Then what?" Daphne asks, quietly.

Perhaps there is another name for what you are destined to be, Narcissa said. *Sorcerer,* Theo thinks.

"Lord Nott," Theo says softly.

For the first time since Apollonius died, Theo does not feel afraid to say those words. He feels the strength of his own conviction. He is not a Mage. He is not Harry. He is Theodore Nott and he will protect himself and the boy he loves with everything he has. *You have a fierce mind. Never doubt its strength.* Theo is determined to put it to good use. If Blaise is right and Theo truly is the heart of the offense against the Dark Lord inside Slytherin then Theo is going to ensure that Rosier and Tremblay and all of the junior Death Eaters are forced back to the Dark Lord on their knees, begging for forgiveness for their failure to subdue the house of Nott and its allies.

"Lord Nott," Daphne repeats with a nod and a brief, sad smile. "Indeed."

"The Orphan Lord with the knife," Blaise smirks, giving him a slight push. "Remember?"

"I do," Theo smiles sharply and remembers Draco's words on that day, before last Yule break: *When our Lord ascends, my father will be the one standing by his side and you will be nothing but an orphan with a knife.* Theo feels it inside him, the thrill of the chase unrolling.

Now I'm not just an orphan with a knife. I'm an orphan with a knife and a Lordship and I am coming for them.

— — —

"Is he coming down?" Lupin asks for the one-hundredth time.

"Yes, wolf, try to exercise some patience," Severus gestures to the bookcase. "Sit and read something."

Lupin shoots him an angry look then throws himself down onto the sofa and pulls a book out of his own bag. Severus knows Lupin is frustrated, irritated that Severus made a mistake but

ultimately, forgiving. Severus is not quite ready to forgive himself. *He forgives too easily anyway, just like his son.*

“So Harry has the Peverell magic? He’s truly the Peverell heir?” Lupin asks. “You’re certain?”

“I am,” Severus thinks of the silky threads of the magic, as silver as thestral hair, floating on the surface of the Black Lake.

“Shit,” Lupin mutters. “Albus can’t find out.”

“Given the conversation we had with him last month, I think he suspects already,” Severus says. “I am more concerned about what he will teach Harrison with regards to it.”

“Well, we can’t control what Albus says in those lessons of his,” Lupin scowls. “But at least he won’t be giving out relationship advice.”

Severus tries not to think of the irony of the husband of Gellert Grindlewald advising their child that his boyfriend is too *dark*.

“You realise this probably makes him the Slytherin Lord? If it’s somehow the Slytherin Lordship ring?” Lupin’s fingers tap rhythmically against his book.

“The Potter-Black-Slytherin Lord,” Severus shakes his head in amusement. “The previous owners of the first two of those Lordships would be horrified with the third.”

“I’m not sure James would care, actually, as long as it took a voting Wizengamot seat away from Voldemort,” Lupin sighs. Severus looks at him sharply. He thinks it is the first time that name has passed between them in months.

“Black, however,” Severus says.

“Outraged,” Lupin says, turning a page of his book.

Severus smirks smugly. He may never understand James Potter, the man who bullied him endlessly, married his girlfriend and then adopted his child, but Black never was and never will be a mystery. He is distracted from his thoughts by the appearance of Harrison. The child appears from thin air in a way that makes Severus wince. Lupin eyes it warily. They’ve discussed it extensively and decided Harrison has enough going on without them bothering him about it, but it does not mean either of them *like* it. Harrison grins at his adopted father as if he has never been happier to see him, drops his satchel and flops down on the sofa in almost exactly the same way Lupin just did. Severus smirks to himself at the similarities he sees developing between them.

“Hey,” Harrison sighs, nestling his head against Lupin’s shoulder.

“Hello, cub,” Lupin says softly. “Severus told me what happened.”

Harrison eyes the pensieve on Severus’ kitchen side and makes a small groaning noise of embarrassment. It is nothing compared to the embarrassment Severus felt in sharing with

Lupin the conversation he had with his son on returning to the castle. Lupin had said nothing when he stepped out of the pensive after viewing it, only gave Severus an exasperated and fond expression before muttering: "At least you apologised." Severus does not feel like it is enough of a triumph to be commented upon.

"It's not your fault," Lupin says, stroking Harrison's hair with ease. "Draco's behaviour was unacceptable."

"Yeah, but I ... I did the thing to Daphne," Harrison winces, as if his guilt is giving him physical pain. He looks up at his adopted father plaintively. "I ... I didn't kind of get what compulsions mean. Ron explained how they're ... they're culturally really really bad, y'know, because of the war and for ... for girls?"

Severus winces. He remembers how many women were raped under compulsions during the first war. He remembers how many cases were brought against Death Eaters who escaped charging by claiming that they too, were under the imperius curse. The war ripped justice away from so many people but just like wars all over the world, women and witches endured the worst of it. *War is not fair*, Severus thinks bleakly. *Or ever kind*.

"Yes, they are," Lupin says softly. "Many terrible things were done to women using compulsions during that time. Largely, monumentally high rates of rape and sexual abuse."

"I didn't know that," Harrison's voice is scared. "Do you think ... do you think that's why Hermione was so upset? Or why Daphne thinks -?"

"I won't presume to put words to Daphne's thoughts or feelings, or Hermione's," Remus says, voice quiet but firm. "Let Hermione explain her feelings and wait until Daphne is ready to speak to you again."

"But she might never be ready because I didn't *know*," Harrison sighs.

"And that wasn't your fault, and you know now," Lupin says gently. "And now you know why you must be very, very careful with your power."

"Yeah," Harrison swallows. "I don't ... I don't want to be like Dumbledore, just, y'know, making decisions for people without asking them first."

"That's good," Lupin says neutrally, but his eyes drift to meet Severus'. It's clear in Lupin's gaze how pleased he is, overwhelmingly, that Harrison wants to distinguish himself from Albus. "But no matter what you did, Harry, it doesn't change the fact that what Draco did was unacceptable."

"Lupin is right," Severus says, carefully picking up the pensieve and moving back towards the bedroom. "School policy does not permit sexual assault of any kind."

"It wasn't," Harrison shakes his head as if he's trying to push the words away. "It wasn't that."

"It was," Lupin says quietly. "But if that term makes you uncomfortable we won't use it."

"It wasn't that bad," Harrison mumbles. Severus walks into his bedroom and sets the pensieve on the nightstand. The door is open and Lupin's clear voice is easy to overhear.

"Did you consent?" Lupin asks.

"No," Harrison's voice is painfully hesitant. "But I ... I was ... well, you saw, I didn't say ... stop. I ... froze."

Severus clenches his fists and stares down into the surface of the pensieve. Inside it, he sees the moment Draco forced himself on his son swirling through silver.

"Consent is an affirmative process, Harry, not a restrictive one," Lupin says. "What does Magnus always say?"

"Legal, consenting, uncompelled and respectful," Harrison parrots.

"Precisely," Lupin's tone is astonishingly calm, especially given how, when Lupin returned from the pensieve, he had kicked a hole in one of Severus' kitchen cabinets that he has sworn to replace. "You were not consenting and he was not respectful."

"That's putting it fucking mildly," Harrison mumbles. "But I ... I didn't get Daphne's consent either, did I?"

"You did not," Lupin says quietly.

"Are you ... disappointed in me?" Harrison's voice is so small, so childlike that Severus closes his eyes.

"Cub, I am never disappointed in *you*," Lupin says earnestly. "I love you and nothing will change that. I am concerned, however, about the consequences of your choices. For *you*, Harry."

There is a long pause.

"Me too," Harrison whispers.

"I believe in your ability to control your power," Lupin says steadily. "You've made a dangerous mistake, it's true, but unfortunately, all the mistakes powerful creatures make are dangerous. You and I, we are powerful creatures and ... I know from experience how society can respond negatively to displays of Creature power. If people had really understood what you did today ..." Lupin lets his words hang. Severus feels the same fear he felt on coming into Hogsmeade that day, a terror that his child would be found out, fears of the Ministry, fears of Azkaban all bubbling in his mind. "We know so little of how a Mage would be publicly received but I do know that ... there are so few second chances for creatures."

"That sucks," Harrison mumbles.

"It does," Lupin's voice is tight. "I wish it was a different world for us, cub."

Severus can hear the regret in Lupin's voice, the regret of a creature who has lived for too long under the suffocating expectations of a judgemental society. Who now must teach his child the same restraint, the same awareness that has been drummed into him by prejudice.

"You don't seem like you make dangerous mistakes, Moony."

"I have forgotten my wolfsbane potion once in my life," Lupin says ruefully. "And I nearly killed you."

"You didn't nearly -,"

"I did," Lupin's voice is clipped. "Without Sirius' intervention -,"

"It wasn't your fault -,"

"It was my responsibility, Harry," Lupin stops him firmly. "I am a werewolf. I am a Creature. I am responsible for my own power. I am not saying I deserve to be villified for it, but I take responsibility for my mistake and the danger it caused. I forgot my wolfsbane. I nearly killed you. It was a dangerous mistake."

There is a long pause and then Severus hears a low hiss, and thinks Harrison might be cursing in parseltongue.

"Yeah." Harrison sighs heavily. "Powerful creatures. Dangerous mistakes."

There is silence and Severus thinks of returning to join them both but something holds him back. He knows his child has felt betrayed by him today. He deserves the opportunity to speak privately with the parent he trusts more, his creature parent for a creature child, even if Severus' chest tightens brutally at the thought of it. Then, as Severus considers, Harrison speaks.

"It's weird but ... I keep thinking about Sirius today."

Severus sits heavily down on the bed. *I truly must have failed today if he longs for a godfather who murdered him.*

"Do you?" Lupin's voice is soft. "I suppose that makes sense."

"Yeah?" Harrison sounds as doubtful as Severus feels.

"Part of you wants justice, cub, maybe even revenge," Lupin continues. "Our current circumstances make access to that immediate justice difficult and revenge ill-advised. Sirius wouldn't have cared, no matter the consequences."

Severus stares down at his Prince ring. 'Difficult' is a small word for maintaining a lie for the Dark Lord, shielding Harrison from Albus, keeping Draco alive and protecting a plethora of deadly secrets.

"Yeah," Harrison sounds teary and Severus wonders when the pain in his chest will stop. "Sirius didn't care much about consequences."

“Yet of the burdens of adulthood is learning that whilst we have very strong feelings, it is not always right or productive to act on them,” Lupin sighs. “Sirius never learned how to do that. He never learned that it is possible to feel outraged and not immediately act on it.”

Severus thinks it is too generous a review of a man who was a horrible bully as well as a man-child, but Harrison’s words cut off his thoughts.

“So you do feel it?” Harrison asks cautiously. “Even if ... even if you’re not screaming and yelling and marching up to the hospital wing to curse him? You do ... feel outraged?”

“Yes,” Lupin’s voice is incredibly firm. The hair on the back of Severus’ neck stands up on end and he knows without seeing that Lupin’s eyes will be bright amber. “Very much. We both do.”

Severus is grateful for being included. In fact, his outrage is taking an entire cliffside of snow inside his mindscape to bury. Carefully he stands and moves back into the corridor, unintentionally keeping to the shadows. He watches as Harrison presses his face into Lupin’s cardigan and Severus knows he is hiding his tears. Today has been too much for him, clearly, it would be too much for any adolescent. He needs to eat and sleep. *I cannot give him the justice he deserves, but I can take care of him as best my position allows.*

“Harrison,” Severus walks back out into the kitchen. “Have you eaten today?”

“Yeah,” Harry huffs with annoyance. “But I threw it all up after I accidentally compelled Daphne.”

And you probably ate hardly anything, just like you did at breakfast. Severus shares a quick glance with Lupin. They need to keep on top of Harrison’s disordered eating.

“Are you still nauseous?” Severus asks.

“No,” Harry shakes his head. “Well, not as much. I can’t taste the compulsion anymore. Magnus says it was different to Malfoy’s.”

“Very likely,” Severus nods. “Kreacher?”

“Lord Prince calls?” Kreacher sticks his head around the door at the back of the kitchen. Harrison jumps.

“What are you doing back there?” Harrison exclaims.

“Kreacher puts Master’s things in Master’s new bedroom like Master *asked*, ” Kreacher snaps. “Where does Master think Kreacher was? Is Master losing his mind? Did Master catch squid brain disease in the lake?”

“I - I have a bedroom?” Harry stares at Severus as if he has grown an extra head. “I thought it was only a spare room.”

“Formally, yes it was but now it has been appropriately allocated.” Severus tries to ignore the slightly smug smile on Lupin’s lips and the baffled expression on Harrison’s face by turning

to Kreacher. “Could you go down to the kitchen and bring us some soup and sandwiches please?”

“And treacle tarts?” Harrison asks hopefully and Severus fights not to roll his eyes. *Circe, not more treacle tarts.*

“Master is still sad?” Kreacher glares. “Master needs tiny tarts?”

“No, I’m not *sad*,” Harrison scowls. “Just ... hungry.”

“Please bring the tarts, Kreacher,” Lupin says politely and Kreacher pops away.

“So I could really sleep here?” Harrison asks Severus warily. “If ... I faked sleeping in a dormitory?”

“You may, yes, but you cannot have Theodore here,” Severus turns on the kettle. “One unsorted student is easy enough to slip through the net of school bureaucracy, no prefects or staff are looking for you since they all assume you are under someone else’s care, but not Theodore. Farley will notice.” *And comment*, Severus thinks darkly. “Tea, Lupin?”

“Earl Grey,” Lupin says.

“Harrison?”

Harry stares at Severus for a second, still seeming shell-shocked that he has a bedroom in his parent’s home, but then he seems to shake it off.

“Me too,” Harry nods.

Kreacher pops back and sets some items on the table; a small cauldron of soup, a plate of sandwiches and a smaller plate of tiny treacle tarts that he instantly smacks Harrison’s hand away from.

“Master will eat soup first,” Kreacher waves his fingers and spare mugs fly out of Severus’ cupboards, forcing him to dodge out of the way with a glare. *Impudent elf*. He and Kreacher have generally been working with an uneasy truce to create Harrison’s bedroom, but since Harrison came back from Hogsmeade Kreacher has been making things fly near Severus’ head repeatedly. He’s being punished and he knows it. Severus merely turns and drops tea bags into cups, reaching for slices of lemon, ducking again as cutlery flies over his head. Kreacher fills a mug with thick, mushroom soup and pushes it into Harrison’s hands.

“Drink, Master,” Kreacher snaps.

“I’m doing it!”

“These sandwiches are excellent,” Lupin says in between a mouthful. “What is this, tongue?”

“God, I hope not,” Harrison grimaces.

“Yes,” Kreacher grins evilly. “Cow tongue.”

“Rank.” Harrison eyes the sandwiches distrustfully. Severus thinks it is entirely warranted.

“It seems that no matter how many years pass, Hogwarts is incapable of advancing its culinary aspirations beyond British boarding school fare,” Severus sighs, setting two cups of tea down on the coffee table for Harrison and Lupin before lowering himself into the leather wingback chair.

“What are you wishing for, Severus?” Lupin smiles. “Fine dining?”

“The occasional curry wouldn’t go amiss,” Severus mutters into his tea. Harrison nods fervently and drinks his soup.

“I love curry,” he mumbles, through a mouthful. “Mr Khan, the man who ran the shop at the end of the road on Privet Drive? He was nice to me, sometimes he’d give me leftovers when they got a takeaway. The Durselys never got good takeaway.”

Severus and Lupin share a brief, curt, stare. A mixture of suppressed horror and fury that their child, their precious child with an eating disorder, was forced to beg leftovers from strangers in his childhood. Lupin recovers first.

“Mrs Evans made an exceptional curry,” Lupin says fondly.

“Really?” Harrison looks at Severus, who nods to confirm. *And if she had lived and been your grandmother, you would never have had to beg for it in your life.*

“One does not grow up in Birmingham without a taste for a good curry,” Severus says drily. “Mrs Evans made a korma.”

“Lily made it too,” Lupin smirks. “Badly.”

“Appallingly,” Severus echoes. He recalls Lily standing over the hob on a Friday night when Mrs Evans was out, glaring at the recipe book. *“I’m good at Potions! I should be good at this!”* Severus laughing as he sautéed onions. *“It needs more garlic, don’t argue with me!”*

Sorrow leaks up inside Severus, sudden and surprising. There’s grief for everything Lily missed, that her son will never stand by her side in the kitchen and laugh at her inability to spice a curry correctly.

Harrison smiles and looks down into his half-empty cup of soup.

“I wish she could have taught me too,” Harrison says quietly. “I’m a good cook.”

Both Severus and Lupin stiffen, watching one another. Then Lupin gently nudges Harry’s shoulder.

“Well, maybe you and Severus can make me one,” Lupin jokes softly. Severus’ heart lurches with a hungry eagerness and he is overwhelmed, briefly, with how much he wants

that. Harrison nods. He quietly takes a sip of his soup and nods at Lupin's book, resting on the table.

"What are you reading?"

"A Welsh poet I think you might like," Lupin smiles.

"Merlin, let it not be Thomas," Severus mutters.

"Who is it?"

"Dylan Thomas."

"Sentimental drivel," Severus rolls his eyes.

"I'm surprised you can even recognise sentiment, Severus."

"Of course I can. You're right here, wolf."

Harrison says nothing but smirks into the rest of his soup, watching them with amusement. *Watching us both*, Severus realises with a shock. He wonders if it is possible that their child has missed living with both of them together, the community of their little unit. The thought fills Severus with a tentative hope he is too anxious to fully examine. Certainly, Harrison is eating more heartily now than he has during any of the meals Severus has seen him eat so far in Hogwarts.

"Read one?" Harrison nudges Lupin, in between eager mouthfuls of soup.

"Alright," Lupin flicks. "Shall I pick one Severus will hate?"

"Severus will hate all of them," Severus says caustically, but Lupin knows this.

"Then pick your favourite," Harrison smirks.

"Ah yes, Severus will hate that most of all," Lupin smirks and begins to read. "*Do not go gentle into that good night -*"

Sadist, Severus thinks, glaring at the wolf. When they were fourteen, Severus told him at length how this particular poem was 'too soppy for words' and Lupin promptly began quoting it to him in their more amorous sessions. There's a particular twinkle in Lupin's eyes that tells Severus he absolutely remembers it. *Fucking sadist*.

"If you will insist on reading this absolute codswallop then I will be forced to do some marking," Severus huffs, rising to collect essays from the table.

"*Old age should burn and rave at close of day;*" Lupin goes on, his voice amused. "*Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.*"

"Because that will undoubtedly be effective against an incoming demise," Severus mutters.

“Keep going,” Harrison grins again and flops down to put his head in Lupin’s lap. Severus watches Lupin’s face as he looks down at his child with infinite tenderness and then begins to stroke his hair. There is so much about Harrison that constantly reminds Severus that the boy is on the brink of adulthood, that so much time has been lost and can never be got back, but at this moment, as Harrison kicks off his shoes and curls his toes and knees up into a ball on the sofa, Severus can only see a child. Harrison seems to drift towards sleep in warmth and comfort as Lupin’s soft words fall over him and the scratch of Severus’ quill fills the air. It is remarkably relaxing and Severus finds himself marking in a kind of haze, his mind focused only on the lilt of Lupin’s voice, his long-suppressed Welsh accent blooming on his tongue. Just like Severus, they both tried to mould their words to reflect their London-based peers during their early years at Hogwarts.

You and me, Remus, both denying our rural and working-class bones to advance in a society that didn’t really want us.

“And you, my father, there on the sad height, curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.”

“Love you, Tad,” Harrison mumbles, nuzzling closer into Lupin’s cardigan.

Lupin seems unable to keep reading, his eyes suddenly glassy. Severus stops writing and stares. He wonders why Lupin hasn’t said anything back but then sees a flicker of anxiety in Lupin’s eyes. *He’s worried about excluding me.*

“Tell him, Remus,” Severus breathes, too quiet for Harrison to hear. The relief in Lupin’s eyes is bright and gold and coupled with something else. Perhaps approval, Severus can’t quite discern it.

“Love you too, Harry,” Lupin presses a soft kiss to the child’s forehead and Harrison sighs contentedly. “We love you so much.”

We. Severus stares at Lupin and realises what he is seeing in Lupin’s eyes. *It is not approval, it is pride. He is proud of me.* Severus doesn’t know what to do with it, part of him wants to roll his eyes and dismiss it, to bury the hope in his heart under ice and another part of him wants to gently disentangle his wolf from their sleepy child and march his lover back to Severus’ bedroom. *Later,* Severus tells himself, trying not to fall into the amber of Lupin’s eyes. He takes a deep breath.

“Keep reading,” Severus’ says softly. Lupin smiles so fondly that Severus wonders if it is possible to fall in love with a man again on the basis of his smile alone. Then Lupin begins to stroke Harrison’s hair again, his quiet, lilting voice chasing the boy down into sleep, and Severus lets a fleeting dream of domesticity flicker through his mind: the three of them, just like this, two parents and a child, on a normal Sunday night in Spinner’s End. Making and eating curry from the famous Evans’ recipe that Severus has memorised, reading quietly together. Their child, happy and safe in a world where nights like this are not a rare occurrence or the result of a disaster but are blissfully, wondrously ordinary.

“Do not go gentle into that good night,” Remus whispers. *“Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”*

Chapter End Notes

Trauma recovery is not linear. It is like the great branches of a tree. When one leaf is touched, other memories shake loose. Our minds are pools of our pasts and when a stone is dropped, we feel the ripples, all the way back to our childhoods. A person is not 'fixed' from a past trauma. They are living with it and as they live, it might make itself known again and again, throughout the years, until a fresh wound becomes a small scar, occasionally twinging unexpectedly. If you live with twinges, if you live with edges, I see you. From one survivor to another, hello.

Trauma responses like Harry and Theo's and Daphnes and even Hermiones are learned very early in childhood. For this reasons, the patterns of behaviour are incredibly difficult to break and unlearn. Many people never unlearn them and every time they are faced with an additional trauma they will slip into familiar behaviour patterns. For lots of people, this goes on for their entire life. Even for people who are in recovery and are learning about their own trauma responses, there will still be times when they slip back into them. If you are a person who knows this struggle well, hello to you too. I see you. It's hard, this recovery stuff. But still, we grow.

if you are struggling with processing your own trauma, you are not alone. What happened to you does not deserve to be diminished or dismissed. You are a survivor. You are worthy of seeking help. If you are struggling to process a sexual abuse trauma - <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>

If you do not have personal experience of the type of trauma that is included in this chapter, please remember that there are people reading this story and reading the comments who do. Let's ensure that the comment space is a safe space for our friends and survivors.

The Scold's Bridle

Chapter Notes

Due for unforeseen circumstances I will be posting this chapter now and taking the next two weeks off. More details can be found on discord.

Tags that don't exist but should be applied to this chapter:

REFERENCES TO RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR AGAINST WOMEN
REFERENCES TO INSTITUTIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT AND SEXISM THAT IS
BAKED INTO A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
REFERENCES TO SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION AND ITS MENTAL HEALTH
IMPACT ON GIRLS IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE
REFERENCES TO HOW LIVING UNDER ANY PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY
PRODUCES WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD TO ENDURE NORMALISED SEXISM
AND SEXUAL ASSAULT SINCE THEY WERE CHILDREN

Just because a man or boy has a mental health spiral because they hurt a woman or a girl, it does not make the woman complicit in their mental health spiral. Any comments that imply otherwise will be deleted.

As always, check the tags, If you are sensitive to any of the tags please consider reading the endnotes first. Be wise about your own wellbeing.

Next time, Harry has a lesson with the Goblin King! See you on the 31st of January!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry stares at Daphne and Hermione, at their tear-streaked faces, sees the way everyone's eyes are hardening around him.

"You're a liar," Daphne whispers, her face twisted with betrayal. "You did an unforgivable thing. I hate you."

Harry wants to call out to her, to beg for forgiveness but he can't. He can't speak. His mouth is sealed shut and he's in the cage again, writhing under Tom's wand as he laughs and laughs.

"We are fruit fallen from the same tree," Tom whispers, his cold face and red eyes painfully close. "I feel the violence within you. How can you not be mine? Crucio!"

Pain. Harry wants it to be over. His bones are on fire but he can't even scream, he can't even breathe.

Let it be over, let it be done, let him kill me -

There's something in Harry's hand. It's the piece of glass from the beach in Skye. Harry presses the glass against his skin. It's quicker and easier than it should be and hurts less than Bellatrix's knife, but he still feels it. His veins open. He begins to feel cold. Shivery and slovenly. He knows he's dying. He's dying alone in the cage, alone in the dark.

But then he is not dead.

He is jerking awake with a gasp and staring into familiar darkness, at the spiders sitting on the woodwork. He's in the cupboard under the stairs. Harry scrabbles for a door handle, desperate to get out but then he realises. There is no handle. There is no door. He's trapped in the cupboard under the stairs. That's when Harry starts to scream.

“Wake up, *farzandam*. Breathe, please. In and out, that's it.”

Harry does, blearily, and realises with hopeless relief that he is not in Number Four. He is still alive. *That's a problem for another day.* Then he realises that he is not on the sofa that he fell asleep on and the warm scent of Remus' cardigan is gone.

“Where am I?” Harry croaks out. He feels a vial of potion pressed against his lips, tastes liquorice root and knows that it is a headache pain reliever. He swallows it greedily.

“In your bedroom in my quarters.” Severus' voice is soft. “Go back to sleep. I will wake you when it is time for you to make an appearance in the Gryffindor dormitory.”

“I don't want to sleep,” Harry gasps and swallows. *I won't go back to Privet Drive.*

“Why, *farzandam*?”

He blinks. A room slowly emerges out of the darkness as his eyes make shape of it by the soft light of his Black ring and the glow of Severus' wand tip. It's small, containing a little bed and a chest of drawers and a bedside table. It's simple and comfortable, but then Harry notices the stack of books on the bedside table, the familiar spines of the books Remus and Severus have leant him in the last year. With a twinge in his stomach he sees them resting beside his jar that once contained the Parvus pixie that Theo has since filled with dried lavender to sit on their windowsill at Spinner's End. He looks down and sees the crochet blanket that laid across their bed has been spread over Harry's legs.

“You ... brought my stuff,” Harry pokes his fingers through the holes of blanket. “From home.”

“It is your room,” Severus says evenly, his fingers carefully taking Harry's pulse at his wrist. “How are your edges?”

Harry winces. It's just like Severus to somehow innately know. The door creaks open and Kreacher pads in with Sahara around his neck. Harry doesn't even ask how he got her, he's

started to suspect that Sahara just appears for Kreacher like she does for Harry, but Kreacher dumps her on Harry's lap with a grunt and flicks his eyes between Harry and Severus.

"Kreacher will make tea," he grunts.

"Chamomile," Severus mutters. Kreacher nods firmly and putters out. Harry sees the glow of the kitchen light turning on down the corridor. Severus turns his eyes back to Harry. "You haven't answered me."

"I ... dreamt about it," Harry grimaces and strokes Sahara's dry scales.

You are raw, Greenheart

You're fucking telling me.

"About what?" Severus asks.

Tell your Sire, Sahara's tongue licks the inside of his wrist. Share your pain.

"Are you a therapist or a snake?" Harry hisses.

"In English, Harrison," Severus says, idly watching the numbers that dance above his Prince ring whenever he checks Harry's vitals. Harry takes a deep breath.

"It was ... just a dream."

"Would you tell me the content of it?"

Maybe it's because Severus is taking his pulse and staring at the medical numbers, but Harry lets the truth fall from his lips.

"I killed myself."

Severus' seems to stiffen, but his eyes don't move from the numbers. He nods curtly. Harry rushes on in relief, desperate to explain.

"It was ... bad. Everyone hated me for what I did for Daphne and Tom was keeping me in the cage and torturing me and ..."

Harry realises it's really fucking hard to say the words. He finds himself running his fingers over his wrists, remembering the way the skin opened and the blood poured out. Sahara quietly rests her head against it and he's comforted.

"Go on," Severus says quietly.

"I just cut them," Harry breathes. "It was so quick and I just ... I did it. I felt it. I ... died."

"And then you woke."

"No," Harry takes a shaking breath out. His hands start to shake. "Then I was back there."

“Where?”

“In the cupboard.” Somehow, it’s much worse than dying in a dream. “I don’t want to go back to sleep, I don’t want to ... to feel that again. To be back there *again*.”

“You need to sleep, Harrison,” Severus says softly.

“I can’t, please, I can’t go back there, don’t make me,” Harry feels panic rising and shakes his head. Without thinking, he digs his nails into his wrist, imagining blood.

“Alright,” Severus’ hand presses against his, flattening his hand out against the skin so he can’t mark it. “I will not make you. We will wait until you are ready.”

Harry nods, taking a shaky breath. Severus nods towards the small pile of books.

“What shall I read to you?”

Harry blinks slowly. Remus has read to him loads, so have Hermione and Theo and Ron, but Harry doesn’t think he’s ever heard Severus read anything aloud aside from instructions in textbooks.

“Um, I ... I like poems when I can’t sleep,” Harry stutters, cheeks flushing. *Is he really going to do this?* Severus nods and reaches for a slim volume, well worn and stained now, the collected sonnets of Shakespeare that Hermione gave him.

“Better than Thomas,” Severus says, opening the book. “Do you have a favourite?”

“I like them all.”

“Then we shall begin at the beginning.” He gestures for Harry to get comfortable as Kreacher comes back in with cups of tea.

“Not stupid rhyming muggle,” Kreacher mutters.

“He’s the father of English literature actually,” Harry says. “That’s what Hermione says.”

“A hard day for Mr Chaucer,” Severus mutters.

“He was a slovenly wench who Mr Bane took to bed,” Kreacher growls.

“That hardly narrows it down,” Harry smirks. He happily accepts the warm cup between his hands, breathing in the particular scent of chamomile and cornflower, sweetened with honey, that he associates with Remus. Harry doesn’t ask why Severus is stocking Remus’ favourite tea in his quarters and happily settles back against his pillow, his headache already vanished, letting Sahara wind herself around his neck like a scarf. Severus sips his own tea and turns the page. Harry looks at him properly for a moment and realises that Severus isn’t in his usual pyjamas. He’s still wearing his shirt and trousers, a cardigan that Harry thinks is one of Remus’ thrown over the top.

“Is Remus still here?” Harry asks. Severus shakes his head and doesn’t offer any explanation as to why they would have stayed up late together and are wearing each other’s clothes. *Don’t think about that.*

“We had a discussion. We decided that you should stay here for a few nights,” Severus says quietly. “That way, your father can be easily accessible to you if necessary.”

Harry usually feels something warm inside of him whenever Severus refers to Remus this way, but right now he feels a twinge of doubt. *Does Severus not mind Remus being my father because Severus doesn’t want to be?*

“Okay,” Harry nods. Right now, the notion of staying here seems completely reasonable. Strangely, it feels how it did when he and Severus and Remus were living in Skye. Not happy, not exactly, but safe. Besides, hopefully he’ll sleep much better tomorrow. “I’ll stay here.”

Severus nods and begins to read Sonnet one.

“From fairest creatures we desire increase, that thereby beauty’s rose might never die ...”

Harry doesn’t sleep better. In fact, he doesn’t think he has slept this badly since the first days after Bellatrix. He dreams of Tom and Malfoy, over and over, but that’s not the worst thing. Over the next few nights, he dreams his suicide in a myriad of ways. He dreams of slit wrists, of throwing himself off his firebolt at full speed, of walking into the ocean and letting the water drag him down, of stepping off the Astronomy tower. The worst thing is, he feels every one. Every last gasp of desperate air, every final, desperate thought of not wanting to die. Then, even more terrible, an afterlife composed of the cupboard under the stairs with no way out. *An eternal cupboard under the stairs.* Harry cannot think of a purer hell.

On the first day after Hogsmeade, Snape sends a note to McGonagall and she wordlessly marches Harry back into Gryffindor common room with a stern announcement that Harry will be moving back in and that’s all there is to it. Hermione immediately enfolds him in a gigantic hug.

“Harry,” she whispers. “I was so worried about you.”

“Mi, I’m sorry,” Harry mumbles tearfully into her coconut scented hair.

“Oh, Harry,” she whispers, equally tearful. “I’m sorry, too! I didn’t - I didn’t *know* about the Malfoy stuff until last night when Ron properly explained, Nott didn’t *tell* me, I thought you’d just got into a fight -,”

“I - I didn’t know the stuff about compulsions and - and girls,” Harry blurts out.

“We don’t need to talk about that,” Hermione’s voice is surprisingly small. Harry’s too tired to understand why.

“I ... I’m sorry if I scared you -,” he stammers on.

“I’m never scared *of* you,” Hermione squeezes him tightly. “*For* you, all the time. You’re my stupidly magically terrifying brother. I love you.”

Harry sighs and presses his forehead into her shoulder.

“I love you too,” he whispers. “Super sister.”

It helps, certainly, but it doesn’t stop the nightmares.

By day, Severus has begun to brew something to stop the suicidal dreams and by night Severus wakes him, listens, and then reads to him until he falls asleep again.

“*Let me come to be still in your silence, and let me talk to you with your silence,*” Severus reads from the collected works of Pablo Neruda on the second night. He says Remus has corrupted Harry’s literary taste and it needs adjustment.

“That’s like the nothing-place,” Harry muses, blowing on the top of his tea. It’s around one in the morning. Kreacher is squashed in next to him in the bed, dunking a chocolate biscuit in Harry’s tea. Severus hesitates and then nods.

“It is,” he says, before continuing to read. “*That is bright as a lamp/ Simple, as a ring/You are like the night/ With its stillness and constellations.*”

“Like Death,” Harry says quietly, thinking of the quiet garden. “She’s quiet and ... full of stars.”

“Master speaks madness,” Kreacher grumbles, dunking his biscuit firmly in the tea so some of it sloshes on Harry’s hand. “Master is going loopy as a Trelawney from lack of sleep.”

“You think Trelawney’s mad too?” Harry asks him, sucking tea off his hand.

“All Trelawneys are mad,” Kreacher says dismissively. “Just like all Blacks are victorious.”

“At what?”

“Everything,” Kreacher scowls.

“What, even croquet?”

“Everything.”

“Hot dog eating contests?”

“Kreacher can eat more hotdogs than anyone,” Kreacher’s eyes take on a devilish glow.

“Master should test him.”

“Fucking will not.”

“Language,” Severus says, clearly not wanting to engage with a full list of everything Kreacher thinks the House of Black is superior at. “Think of the quietness of your mindscape. It might be able to give you some protection when you sleep.”

“Okay.”

Harry hands his tea to Kreacher and sinks down into his pillow, seeing the cold, icy lake in his imagination. When Severus starts to read again, Harry imagines that his words drift like snowflakes over ice.

“Your silence is that of a star, As remote and candid ...”

Harry wakes for the second time an hour later, gasping and sweating, feeling something heavy against the end of the bed. Kreacher is curled up on his pillow, snoring. Harry realises that Severus is asleep at the end of the bed, propped up against the wall with his legs stretched out across the duvet and Pablo Neruda resting in his lap. Harry doesn't have the heart to wake him and his mind full of violent thoughts, visions of his own skull smashing against concrete and his head pounding with the abrupt pain of it. So Harry simply turns himself the other way in the bed and lays his head in Severus' lap. He breathes in deeply, taking the scent of sage of burnt rosemary into his lungs and thinks of his mindscape, of the snow stretching across the ice. He thinks Severus' words to himself over and over: *let me come to be still in your silence ...*

The next time Harry wakes it's when Kreacher rouses him to go through to the dormitory.

“Master must get ready,” Kreacher croaks softly. Harry has been using the Hogwarts magic to move to the Gryffindor bathroom and wash and change there. Ron's been covering for him. He hasn't dislocated anything once in moving and he thinks he's getting better.

“Okay,” Harry groans. He realises he is lying on his side and staring at Severus' shoulder. The man is lying flat on his back on Harry's bed, pressed against the wall, rubbing his eyes as he wakes. With a jolt, Harry realises Severus has slept beside him. *Well, this is the most fucking awkward thing to ever happen to me.* Severus turns his slow eyes on Harry and Harry holds his breath, wondering if it's going to be weird. Obviously, he's slept beside Remus countless times in Rome and in Skye, but this is different. Remus isn't here. Maybe, Severus will be awkward or apologise, which Harry thinks would be so deeply embarrassing that he doesn't even want to imagine it. *Please don't make it weird. Please.*

“Do you need a potion?” Severus' voice is gravelly with sleep. “For your head?”

“No,” Harry whispers. Severus nods slowly.

“I will see you this evening then,” he says, sitting up slowly. “Hopefully, the adapted potion will have a successful impact tonight.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, watching as Severus winces as he climbs out of bed. His back is always worse in the morning. Harry wonders suddenly when it was that he learned this fact about his Sire. When he stopped being just Draco Malfoy's awful godfather who also, through a twist of unfortunate fate, happened to be Harry's Sire and started being the man who has a sore

back in the morning and brews Harry's potions and is a person that Harry wants to protect. *When did he become more?* He realises that he doesn't care that Severus slept beside him. He's grateful.

- - -

Did you sleep at all?

Not really.

Which poet?

Neruda. Has Daphne said anything?

She needs time. Rosier is spreading a rumour that you cursed someone in parseltongue.

Great.

Try and sleep now. It's six am. You could get an hour in.

I can't. I'm scared. I can't.

I am going to help him brew.

You don't have to do that

I am going to do something.

- - -

Harry's days are a fog of utter exhaustion and he is moving through them, half blind. He's stopped speaking to most people. Most of his professors frown at him in class, confused by his lack of communication and listlessness. Ron has taken to carrying a flask of coffee with them wherever they go and pressing cups of it onto Harry as they wait outside classrooms. Hermione has taken up the position as his personal pillow, letting him nap on her lap in the library regularly, stroking his hair until he nods off and soothing him when he jerks awake from nightmares even in the middle of the day. Theo's told everyone that Professor Snape is working on a secret project and even though it means that they haven't been alone for days, Harry is glad. Theo needs to be doing something. Harry's tried about six potions in three days and Theo and Severus have brewed many more than that. Nothing seems to cloak the nightmares.

"Drink this," Blaise says, nudging Harry's nutrition potion across the table to him at dinner on day three. Harry does, because with Draco sitting further down the Slytherin table, his eyes consistently flicking up towards Harry, it's impossible to eat. The smell of compulsion seems stronger since Hogsmeade and it makes Harry queasy every fucking second on the day.

"Hey! Potter-Black! If I say I fancy Zabini will you batter me too?" MacLaggan yells from the Gryffindor table. "Wanna be a muggle brawler, like your muggle cousin?"

Harry watches as Ron, Hermione and Ginny throw bread rolls at his head.

"What's that about?" Harry asks wearily.

"The Hogwarts rumour mill surpasses itself once again," Blaise shakes his head and pours Harry a glass of pumpkin juice. "The accepted version of events is you brawled Draco because his paramour asked to court me, and also that you're some kind of muggle ultimate dueller, because you have a muggle cousin who fights with his fists?"

"He's a boxer, yeah," Harry dispassionately looks along the Gryffindor table. "Seamus must have told them."

"What? He's gonna curse *me* in parseltongue too?" MacLaggan yells at Ron, who has started to throw chicken legs that Hermione is bewitching to batter MacLaggan around the head.

"That, unfortunately, was Rosier," Blaise mutters. "Don't worry, we are handling it."

Harry is too tired to be worried.

"I'll fucking curse you in English, wanker!" Ginny yells, standing up.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, Miss Weasley!" McGonagall shouts.

On Harry's other side, Theo presses his knee against Harry's.

He feels the tenderness of the bond, tinged with worry.

We'll work something out, I promise. Things will get better.

Thank you. I love you.

I love you too.

It's all Harry can manage and he sighs, wincing and rubbing his scar.

"What if you didn't try to stop the dreams?" Luna says in a tender voice. On Theo's other side, Luna has been sat quietly, feeding sausage to her ferret. Luna is the only one who is utterly uncaring of the fact that it's the Slytherin table. Harry thinks it's because none of the Slytherins really know what to do with Luna and her ferret who is currently drinking pumpkin juice out of the jug. "Why not try to make the dreams good instead?"

"Make them good," Theo whispers, eyes widening as he scrambles to his feet. "Excuse me."

Harry stares down at his plate, feeling bereft of Theo's presence. Harry fruitlessly wishes what he has wished every day since Hogsmeade: that he had stayed in bed with Theo and never gone in the fucking first place.

No one can turn back time, Greenheart, not even you, Sahara whispers inside his head.

What's the point of being this powerful if I can't undo my mistakes? Harry thinks balefully. Sahara doesn't answer.

"Have you thought about saying sorry to Daphne?" Remus asks through the floo on the fourth night.

"I did," Harry says miserably. He's sat on the rug in front of Severus' fire, wrapped in one of Ron's homemade jumpers, a maroon one with a giant R. Everyone in the tower thinks he's serving a weeks worth of detention with Severus. The benefit of this is Harry doesn't have to hang out in the common room where MacLaggen can yell at him and doesn't have to deal with Seamus at night because they all think that Harry's climbing into bed after they're asleep when he's actually in his room at Severus'. He showers early, around five or six o'clock and is back down in the common room before anyone in the tower wakes. "Besides, she shouldn't have to forgive me."

"Honestly, you and Severus are two peas in a pod," Remus smiles fondly through the fire. "Just because you might not be forgiven doesn't mean you shouldn't ask."

Harry's not sure what Severus hasn't asked forgiveness for.

"Why?" Harry says. "I don't want to pester her and she's already fucking suffered enough from me. Why would I ask for something I don't think she should have to give me?"

“Because it starts a dialogue,” Remus says gently. Harry misses him, even though he can firecall him whenever he wants from Severus’. Harry misses the smell of his magic and the strength of his hugs. “It shows her your first instinct to say sorry right after it happened wasn’t just an attempt to protect yourself. It demonstrates your sincerity and opens the possibility for reconciliation.”

“It feels unfair,” Harry swallows, remembering the utter betrayal in Daphne’s face. “I ... I took something from her. I shouldn’t take anything else.”

“Then don’t,” Remus says calmly. “Say sorry and offer to listen, Harry. Offer to work on your friendship. Not all of your friends are going to be like Ron and Hermione who just know you. Some need more words.”

“I’m shit at words,” Harry mumbles, poking his thumbs through the holes in the cuffs of Ron’s jumper.

“On the contrary, Harry, when you speak honestly people always listen, and you are a rather lovely writer when you want to be, not to mention very funny,” Remus says drily. “Be honest with her Harry. Tell her the truth.”

Before he tries to go to sleep that night, Harry writes a letter.

When he wakes three hours later from a dream where he drove Vernon’s car off a cliff and drowned, Kreacher has brought him some tea and Severus has sat on the bed with the collected works of Rumi in his hand, Harry hands the letter to Severus.

“Was there any difference?” Severus asks, nodding to the potion on the nightstand, the one Severus and Theo worked on the day before.

“Everything was fuzzier,” Harry frowns. “But it wasn’t, like, *good*. ”

“Did you still kill yourself?” Severus asks, a little abruptly.

“Yes,” Harry winces. He taps the letter. “Can you read this for me?”

Severus does as Harry sips his tea.

“You value Miss Greengrass more than I realised,” Severus says, handing the letter back.

“Is it good?” Harry presses, desperately.

“It is generous and kind without being unrealistic,” Severus gives Harry a gentle but vaguely stern look. “You must not make promises you cannot keep.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks.

“There is no spell or compulsion I would not have you use in defence of your *own* life,” Severus says flatly. “Do you understand?”

Harry hesitates and then nods, slowly. Harry looks down at his letter.

“Do you think she’ll forgive me?” Harry asks in a small voice. Severus hesitates.

“Does it matter?” His voice is equally quiet. “If you mean what you say then you will change and if your actions are predicated upon her forgiveness then you do not truly mean it. It is our actions that follow our choices not our choices in themselves that reveal our true character.”

Harry stares at him. He thinks of Dumbledore’s words: *it is our choices, Harry, that reveal who we really are*. Dumbledore wasn’t wrong, necessarily, he just didn’t quite get it right.

“It’s like that saying, actions speak louder than words, right?”

“I have always found so,” Severus nods. “Redemption is endless days of decisions rather than one singular moment.”

Harry stares at Severus’ fingers as they turn the pages of the book. Severus has never asked Harry for forgiveness for everything that happened in the past. For leaving Harry, for Harry’s childhood, for the prophecy and all the years when they hated one another. Not once. Harry isn’t actually sure he could forgive Severus, yet Harry knows that Severus is sorry. *I am beyond regretful*, that’s what Severus said when Harry came back from the Ministry last year. Harry knows it’s true every single day. He sees it in the poetry and potions and feels it in the tethers between them.

“I forgive you,” Harry blurts out. He can’t say he forgives him for all of it, but he can say this. “For... after Hogsmeade. With Draco.”

Severus pauses for a moment. The tethers between them tighten a minuscule amount.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, before beginning to read. “*Happy the moment when we are seated in the palace, thou and I ...*”

- - -

Did I hear Draco was in the hospital wing? With boils?

Ask your elf.

And why did Professor Flitwick put Rosier in a week of detentions?

Ask an anonymous contributor of valuable information about how Rosier has been forcing someone else to write his Charms essays.

Who?

Bennett Chaffley, he's a 7th year Huff and his father works in Malfoy's office.

No, who's the anonymous contributor?

I couldn't possibly say.

I love you so fucking much, Nott.

I love you too, Potter.

You sure?

My life and my secrets.

I protect what protects me.

Too bloody right I do.

- - -

“Can you give this to Daphne?” Harry asks Hermione on day five, holding out the letter.

“Of course,” Hermione says, giving him a rueful understanding smile from where they are sitting on a window seat in the library. Hermione and Daphne are still spending time together, rumours are flying around school that they’re courting and Harry is wildly happy for them. “But don’t you want to talk to her in person?”

Harry can see Hermione’s hopeful earnestness. She’s been amazing this week, not once bringing up the fact that Daphne can barely stand to be in the same room as Harry and Harry is doing absolutely nothing about it. She’s been kind and affectionate and everything Harry needs but he knows, deep down, it’s killing her that she can’t fix it between her brother and the girl she might be going out with. Harry shakes his head wearily.

“That’s the Gryffindor way of doing things,” Harry sighs. Hermione squeezes his hand tenderly.

“Do you want me to say something?” Hermione whispers.

“No,” Harry doesn’t want Hermione to get in the middle of it. He shrugs helplessly. “Can I have a nap?”

“Yes.” Hermione smiles at him with warm brown eyes.

“Thanks,” Harry sighs. He twists around and puts his head in her lap, trying to sleep. Behind his eyes, he sees green light. *They despise you*, a cold voice whispers. *You are everything they fear and hate.*

Fuck off, Tom, Harry thinks blearily.

Make me, Harry. I would so love to see you make me.

Harry is too tired to fight back so he imagines a cold lake inside his mind and dives inside it. He lets the water close over his head, the coldness numb his mind. Silence. *My silence is that of a star*, Harry thinks dreamily.

Daphne,

I’m so fucking sorry.

I’m not sorry because I feel shit and everything is weird - I should feel shit because I did a shitty thing - I’m sorry because I caused you pain. I’m sorry I broke your trust by lying about compelling Draco. I’m sorry I betrayed you by compelling you and taking away your freewill. I was brought up muggle, so I didn’t really get how bad compelling people was, especially girls, until Hermione and Ron explained. I’m not saying this like an excuse, because I know it isn’t one. I should have known and even if I didn’t, I totally shouldn’t have used magic that I didn’t really understand.

I really hope you haven't made a bad choice in being my friend but some days I honestly don't know. I'm powerful and my mistakes are dangerous and those are my responsibility. Someone told me that actions matter more than words so I'll just say this. I will do better. I fucking swear to you. I will.

I'm not asking you to change your mind and want to be my friend again, but I want you to know that I do miss you. I miss being friends.

Your friend,

Harry

“Can I talk to you?”

Harry blearily stares up from his breakfast on day six, wondering if the potions are making him hallucinate. Severus and Theo are experimenting with ingredients that will give good dreams but although Harry's dreams have taken on a strange, kind of cartoonish quality, it doesn't seem to stop him living his own death again and again. Theo's thinking of experimenting with unicorn hair and Severus has been talking about blood, which is how Harry knows it's bad but none of it explains this. Daphne is standing behind him as he sits at the Gryffindor table. Then he looks down and sees his letter in her hands.

“Um, yeah, absolutely,” Harry scrambles to stand, pushing his uneaten toast away and staring at Hermione desperately for some guidance. “Um, do you - do you want to do it here?”

“A walk,” Daphne says tightly, jerking her head to outside. It's drizzling, it's been raining all week, but Harry couldn't give a fuck. His stomach is flipping with both nauseating excitement and terror.

“Okay, yeah,” he stumbles to his feet, his robes catching on the bench. “Shall we - shall we take someone with us, I mean, if you don't want to be alone with -?”

“Granger,” Daphne says. Hermione nods and stands up, walking with both of them out of the Great Hall and into the grey morning. Harry expects her to walk at Daphne's side but oddly, it's Harry's hand she takes as they walk purposefully down towards the Black Lake. It is only when they have started on the circular path around it that Harry and Hermione walked so endlessly in their fourth year that Daphne starts to speak.

“All I want are answers to my questions,” Daphne says tautly. “They're my questions, they might not make sense to you, I don't have to explain them but I want honest answers from you. The true answers. Otherwise we can give up on this conversation.”

“Um, okay,” Harry shoots a terrified glance at Hermione and receives an encouraging smile. “That's ... yes, I'll ... I'll give you honest answers.”

As honest as I can whilst still guarding so many secrets. Harry hopes, desperately, that she doesn't ask him what he is. Or if Sirius was really his father. He doesn't want to lie but he will to protect Severus. It's a weird and abrupt realisation, of what he will sacrifice to keep Severus' secrets as well as his own.

"Did you compel Draco to take your Sanctuary?" Daphne asks.

"No."

Harry hopes she doesn't have too many questions about this. He can't compromise Narcissa because that will compromise Severus and Harry won't do that.

"But you did compel him."

Harry's throat feels sticky but he nods.

"Yes," he whispers. "About ... about something else. He was ... going to hurt me."

They continue to walk. The slight drizzle is making her dark hair shiny, almost silver and there is a small frown line between her perfect eyebrows.

"Have you ever cast the Imperius curse?" She asks.

"No," Harry shakes his head. It doesn't seem like much of a good thing right now but he clings to it. *I've never intentionally tried to completely control anyone.*

"But you've compelled people other than me."

"Yes," Harry whispers. He feels shit for every single time he's done it now. The pixie, the Goblin King and Bill, Draco and Daphne. *I'm such a fucking idiot.*

"Has anyone ever compelled you?"

"Yes."

"Who and when and how?" Daphne asks insistently. Harry can't help but slow his step and Hermione squeezes his hand. Daphne seems to realise that her question is difficult because there is a slight softening around her eyes but she doesn't take it back.

"Voldemort," Harry swallows. "In the graveyard when he was resurrected. He used the Imperius curse and ... he made me bow."

Hermione's grip on his hand is so tight it almost hurts and Harry's glad, because it's keeping him in his body. *I'm here. I'm not in the graveyard. I can do this.* Oddly, it's Severus' voice in his head: *Redemption is endless days of decisions rather than one singular moment.*

"But you can throw off the Imperius curse," Daphne says quietly. "So what's the worst spell that's ever been used on you?"

“The worst ...” Harry thinks, staring up at the low, misty clouds. “Um, the cruciatus curse sucks, Dido’s lament is fucking awful ... I dunno, what makes it the worst?”

“The one that made you feel the most helpless,” Daphne says quickly. Daphne’s voice is cool and clinical but Harry sees that her hands are trembling lightly. If he couldn’t see just how hard it was for her to be in his presence after what he did, he might put a stop to this but he’s filled with nothing but miserable regret. *This is fair*, Harry tells himself fiercely. *I made her feel the most helpless. She deserves to know.*

“Okay,” Harry takes a deep breath. “Um, when I was ... y’know, taken, Bellatrix was the one who ... well, she tortured me. Like, a lot.”

Both Hermione and Daphne have stopped walking and are staring at him. Harry can’t look in their eyes so instead, looks out over the water, noticing how the mist blends with its surface on the other side of the lake. *I’m not in the cage. I can talk about this.*

“It was ... bad. Lots of things about it were bad, she let me get too cold, she tortured me and cut me up, but the worst thing was she ... she used magic to hold me in place when she ...”

Harry flexes his left hand, the insistent tremor and the mutilated finger. Hermione is staring at him, her eyes filling with tears. He realises that he’s never told her what happened. He’s never told anyone. Not in this many words. He presses on.

“I don’t even know if it was a curse or anything really, but I couldn’t move, I couldn’t speak or ... scream. She sealed my mouth shut and I ... well. She had a knife and her wand and she just ... took my clothes off and took me apart. Bit by bit. There was nothing I could do.”

“Harry,” Hermione whispers, pressing her head against his shoulder. He can feel the warmth of her Potter magic pulsing through her. He tastes tea and feels warm, despite the chilling rain. *You are loved, you are loved, you are loved.* Harry believes her. He just hopes she’s not making a horrible mistake in loving him.

“And that’s the most helpless you’ve ever felt?” Daphne presses. He’s unbelievably relieved to see sympathy in her eyes. He never thought he’d ever feel anything but annoyed by sympathy from other people but right now, it’s giving him hope. Maybe, just maybe, she won’t hate him as much at the end of this conversation as she did at the beginning. So he has to keep being honest.

“No,” Harry says shortly.

“When then?”

“When I was growing up.”

Daphne holds his gaze.

“What did they do?” She asks quietly.

Harry looks down at his right hand: *I must not tell lies.*

“They were...” *Abusers. Terrible. Sadistic. Criminals.* All the words that Severus and Remus and Hermione and Ron and Theo and the twins have been using for months crowd into his mind but Harry finds he can’t say any of them. “Some people think they were ... they are ... abusive.”

“Some people?” Daphne raises her eyebrows. “Don’t you think that?”

“I don’t like that word,” Harry mumbles, staring down at his shoes and kicking a rock.

“I see that,” Daphne gives him a sharp look. “That doesn’t stop it being true.”

Harry nods. They walk on for a little longer. Hermione has wrapped herself around Harry’s arm, as if she’s wanting to keep him warm and close, worried he might disappear. He’s ridiculously grateful for it. *I’m here. I’m not at Privet Drive. I’m not in the cage. I’m alive.*

“I am neuro divergent, my mind is different to yours,” Daphne says abruptly. “So much of the world is indifferent and unpredictable. Control matters to me. I like to be in control.”

“I know,” Harry swallows hard. “I’m sorry I took away your control. And I’m sorry ... I didn’t know about how bad it was for women in the first war, like, with compulsions and stuff.”

“Have you ever heard of a Scold’s bridle?” Daphne stops walking under the willow tree and turns to look at him. Her brown eyes are furious.

“No.”

“It’s a muggle medieval torture device designed to silence a woman and humiliate her,” Hermione says quietly. “It’s a metal cap that goes over the head and it has a metal piece that goes into the mouth and makes speech painful and impossible.”

“Muggles used them on women suspected to be witches,” Daphne’s eyes are suddenly glassy. “Wixen culture doesn’t need a scold. Pureblood family culture, the Sacred Twenty Eight, they don’t need a scold. They have compulsions.”

Harry’s blood runs cold as the implications of what he did to Daphne fall on him, heavy as chains. Oddly, he feels as if his tongue is pressed by lead, as if he cannot speak. He’s imaging a scold’s bridle now, forcing it onto Daphne’s head.

“It ... it happened to you?” He croaks out.

“My parents love me, love us, they would never ...” Daphne swallows hard and looks out over the lake. “But my Aunt, there was a Death Eater in the war ...”

Harry’s stomach swoops, remembering Remus’ words: *Monumentally high rates of rape and sexual abuse.* Daphne keeps going.

“And then my mother, in her family, when she was young.”

“Your Mum, she was -?”

“No. In pureblood culture, compulsions are not only used for sexual assault.” Daphne’s face hardens. “There was a time when it was normal. Expected. They were used as way to control girls and women, a way to *subdue* women in marriage or in family life and it hasn’t disappeared from wixen culture, even today.”

“Remus told me about - about the war,” Harry whispers. “He didn’t say that it still ...,”

“There are jokes about it,” Hermione says quietly. “Boys joke about it. Here. The nasty ones.”

“What do you mean?” Harry stares at his best friend. He remembers the tears in Hermione’s eyes when she realised what he’d done in Hogsmeade, he remembers her words the day after: *we don’t have to talk about it now*. “Can we talk about it now, Mi? Please?”

Hermione looks at him sadly and rubs her arms.

“They say stuff,” she whispers. “*She’s so mouthy, nothing a good compulsion couldn’t fix -*,”

“*She’s got too many opinions, any wife of mine will keep quiet or I’ll compel her -*,” Daphne adds.

“*I could fuck a mudblood if she didn’t speak, but that’s what ...what compulsions are for,*” Hermione continues, her voice breaking and Harry can see remembered pain in her eyes. This is something someone has *said* to Hermione. *No wonder she was so worried and angry when I did a compulsion on a girl*. But Harry’s own dismay at his own actions is being taken over by anger. Blood boiling anger.

“Who the *fuck* is saying this shit?” He demands lowly, feeling his arms trembling. He can’t stop thinking of the cage, of Bellatrix tearing off his shirt and him unable to move. “Who said that to you?”

“Harry, it’s not worth it,” Hermione whispers. “I don’t even know his name, he just tried something in the library once -,”

“Someone *tried* to -?”

“No, they just ... said things,” Hermione swallows heavily and then her voice takes on scorn. “Also, there was no *way* he would be able to curse me, he was a third year and utterly *useless*. Honestly.”

Harry can tell, immediately, that even if that was true, the fact that a boy at school once tried was still terrifying. It’s no surprise, Harry thinks weakly, that Hermione always works so hard to be the best. To be more proficient and more powerful than everyone else.

“Tell me who it was!” Harry exclaims, “Jesus Christ! Even if it *was* just talk, they’re talking about - about rape and - and -,”

“You’ve really never heard people say this?” Daphne looks skeptical. “Not in the locker rooms, or the dormitories?”

“No, I fucking *haven't!*” Harry exclaims.

“They probably don’t do it in front of Harry,” Hermione says to Daphne in a quiet voice. “He doesn’t have loads of pureblood friends and besides that, he likes boys.”

“Not all the time,” Harry protests, though it’s a bit irrelevant. “Seriously, Mi, tell me now, tell me everyone who’s ever said -,”

“Harry, it’s not always like that,” Hermione says quietly. “Sometimes it’s things girls overhear from other girls, like something Lavender told me someone said last year, or something I thought I heard someone say in the library -,”

“And it’s always been like this?” Harry demands.

“If you’re asking how long I’ve been aware that men can be predators, it’s since I was eight,” Hermione says, her eyes taking on a fierce glow. “I’m a black girl living in Clapham, my school was mostly white. Mum had to explain to me pretty young that men ... they were going to look at me differently. That they might ... try things.”

Hermione’s voice is hard. Her magic smells like blackberries and justice and protest.

“If you’re asking me, a boy tried to compel me when I was six years old to get me to shut up,” Daphne says tonelessly. “Then at eight because he thought it was funny, then at nine because he was bored, then at ten because he wanted to see my knickers.”

"Was it ... the same boy?" Harry asks, thinking that's someone he could actually punch in the face and not give a shit.

"No, why would it be?" Daphne stares at him blankly. "In pureblood culture, it is rife. And if you’re asking about a racial bias, it certainly exists in the Wixen world.”

“Yeah, I definitely get more comments like this as a black witch than Lavender gets,” Hermione says tautly. “Angelina did as well.”

“I loathe Pansy Parkinson but I know she has experienced similar levels of sexist aggression since starting school,” Daphne says flatly. “As an East Asian woman.”

“Yes,” Hermione nods firmly. “But then there’s blood stuff too, like, girls who are muggleborns, like me and Katie Bell, the kind of comments we get are different. *I’d never marry a muggleborn but I’d give one a spin with the right compulsions.*”

“With pureblood girls, they always speak about marriage,” Daphne says, her mouth twisting with distaste. “And control.”

“The only girl I know who gets less of this kind of thing is Ginny,” Hermione shakes her head. “Because of her brothers. And her bat bogey hex.”

“It is why I guard Astoria the way I do,” Daphne says.

Harry doesn't know what to say. He feels like someone has opened a portal and suddenly, the world is completely different to what he thought it was.

"You didn't tell me all this stuff," Harry whispers. "We've talked about the muggleborn stuff and racism and, like, homophobia but all this ..."

Hermione's eyes fill with tears.

"There's lots of stuff about being a girl, Harry," she whispers. "It's ... it's hard to explain."

Harry realises, then, how blind he has been. It's not the same as when he realised what he did to Daphne, he's not ashamed of his blindness, but he does, suddenly regret it as he looks with compassion at his best friend. He realises there is a whole other side to her existence that, with two boys for best friends, she has never quite had the space or words to express. *And she shouldn't have to express it to make me understand it*, Harry thinks fiercely to himself. For the first time perhaps *ever*, Harry thinks he might actually take a book out from the library, if there is one on wixen feminism to be had. All he does right now is squeeze Hermione's hand and swallows hard.

"Yeah, it is," he whispers. "I'm not ... like, I'm not outraged because I *don't* believe you both or I'm mad at you, I just ... It makes me so mad, I *know* what it feels like when someone ... I know it's different," he looks at Hermione and sees her smiling wryly. "It's *totally* different for girls, and I ... I'm sorry that people say that shit and ..." he meets Daphne's eye and speaks from the heart, remembering Remus' words: *when you speak honestly people always listen*. "Just because I didn't know about all this and what it meant when I did it, I know that doesn't make it better. I'm a boy and I ... I compelled you and you're *scared* of being compelled by a boy and I am so fucking sorry I did it." He takes a deep breath and looks at Hermione. "I know you're never scared of me but I'm sorry if I reminded you of ... those other boys."

"I know you are," Hermione rubs his arm. "I'm sorry, too, because ... yes, I was reminded and I was really *sad* you did it, but something bad happened to you afterwards and ... you were sexually assaulted too, Harry." Hermione's eyes become glassy and her voice is broken. "You're right, it is different, you're not a girl but ... we understand that pain."

Harry winces at the words 'sexually assaulted' but he nods. They do understand it, perhaps better than Ron or Remus or Severus or Theo can.

"It sounds bloody hard," Harry whispers at Hermione. "Being a girl."

"It is," Hermione laughs, wiping her eyes. "In both worlds."

Harry nods. He knows how hard it can be for girls in the muggle world, realistically, he thinks he knew that but he since he entered the magical world, he's never stopped to think that it might be hard for girls here too, or it might impact the girl he loves most in the world. Sure, he's known things are hard for Hermione, particularly being black and being a muggleborn, but he's never thought about how being a *girl* is so different.

But it is, Harry tells himself firmly. And I'm going to make sure I never make this kind of thing hard for them again. He looks at Daphne.

"I really am sorry," he whispers.

Daphne stares back at him, her arms folded. She takes a deep sigh and looks up at the dripping willow leaves. Harry thinks that she suddenly looks very pensive and young.

"Wixen society is more progressive than muggle society in terms of sexuality, I believe, but pureblood society hides its misogyny behind magic," Daphne says softly. "Women can be Masters in any field but there are still people who look at me, a female heir of colour, at an Asian woman, and want to silence me. To take away my voice. I will not let that happen." Daphne's eyes flash with a fierce determination that Harry feels her magic thrum with power. "My family have fought too long to keep it."

"I understand," Harry says solemnly. "When someone takes control of my life or, like, my body, I fucking hate it. I ... I never want to make someone feel like that and I'm really sorry that I did it to you."

"You haven't promised to never do it again," she says sharply.

"No, I haven't," he says with a wince.

"Do you know compulsions are addictive?" Daphne asks sharply.

"Yeah," Harry whispers. "I do."

"So?"

"I ..." Harry looks between them helplessly. "I'm trying not to lie."

"I know," Hermione says gently. He closes his eyes and decides that he can tell the truth without telling the *whole* truth.

"I don't ... I don't exactly know how to control it all the time," he whispers. "Someone told me not to be afraid of my power but ..."

It's really hard when this stuff happens.

"Are you afraid?" Daphne asks flatly. "Of your power?"

How can you be afraid of parts of yourself, Greenheart? Sahara whispers.

Really fucking easily, Harry thinks.

Harry sighs and looks out over the water of the Black lake. The squid's tentacles wave lazily in the breeze.

"I'm scared of people getting hurt," he whispers.

“But they will do, it’s a war.” Daphne puts her hands in the pocket of her cloak and frowns at him like he’s illogical. “You didn’t mean to, but you hurt me. Given the choice, I would rather have taken the curse. That might seem irrational to you, but I’d rather have taken the curse of the necklace given to me by an enemy and still trust you as I did and not feel this ... all of this.” Daphne’s eyes become glassy and Harry thinks he sees everything she’s told him about the past and the experiences of the women of her family inside them. Harry nods slowly. He thinks about what Remus said about the consequences of power.

“Look, I know I don’t *want* to do it again,” Harry says desperately.

“That matters, Harry,” Hermione says quietly. “I really don’t want you to do it again either.”

“I don’t want you to do it to *me* again,” Daphne says firmly. “Or any other woman.”

“And we never want what Draco did to you to happen to you or anyone else,” Hermione whispers, eyes bright with tears. “You did nothing to deserve that.”

“She is right,” Daphne’s voice is clipped. “I have been hurt but her statement is entirely logical. No sexual assault is ever deserved.”

Harry nods gratefully, thinking of Remus’ words: *Just because you might not be forgiven doesn’t mean you shouldn’t ask.*

“Listen, I know it’s unfair to ask for forgiveness so I’m not going to ask but I’m just going to say ...,” Harry takes a deep breath. “I hope you want to be my friend again one day and one day you can ... forgive me.”

“Why is it unfair to ask my forgiveness?” Daphne frowns deeply.

“Because I don’t deserve it,” Harry mumbles, flushing deeply.

“Don’t you?” Daphne glares at the squid and shrugs. “Then I shall not give it. If you do not want to be forgiven then I won’t forgive you.”

“But I do want to be,” Harry blurts out. Daphne turns to glare at him instead, like he’s a particularly complicated academic problem.

“That does not make sense,” she says emphatically, then her expression clears, as if the answer has suddenly presented itself. “Oh. This is the famous Harry Potter self-flagellation.”

“Huh?” Harry stares at Hermione who shrugs with a grin.

“You do that, Harry,” she smirks.

“I do what?” Harry repeats dumbly.

“Well, I have to tell you I won’t stand for it,” Daphne says briskly. “Theodore probably told you I am not like Granger here, I do not indulge self-pity, it is unbecoming. So either decide if you want forgiveness or not and then tell me.”

Hermione smirks and covers her mouth with her hand, her eyes sparkling with amusement as she gazes at Daphne. *Oh man*, Harry thinks as he takes in the besotted delight in her face. *She is so screwed.*

“I want it,” Harry says quickly.

“Then you have it,” Daphne gives him a look as if he is thoroughly bizarre. “Do not lie to me again unless your life or someone else’s depends upon it.”

“Understood,” Harry says, stepping back and shaking out his hand. Sparks fall from his fingertips, hissing in the rain. “But you know that happens a lot more often than you would think.”

“There is nothing wrong with secrets,” Daphne says calmly. She offers her hand to Hermione and Harry’s really happy to see Hermione shyly take it. He wonders when and if Daphne will give Hermione permission to use her first name. “They are not shameful if they are necessary. Simply tell me it is not for me to know.”

“You won’t be offended?” Harry asks cautiously. “If you’re not included?”

“Why would I be?” Daphne shrugs. “Lies are offensive, not secrets.”

Harry stares at Hermione who shrugs back at him. Harry knows they’re both thinking about the many, many times they have fallen out with each other or Ron over secrets.

“Gryffindors, I guess,” Hermione grins. “Can’t keep a secret to save their lives anyway.”

Harry laughs and for the first time in a week, feels a tightness easing inside his chest.

- - -

Do you think I’m dangerous?

Why are you asking?

Tom calls me his weapon. Maybe he knows, deep down, what I’m capable of.

Harry. You are a Mage. You are not inherently evil just because you could cause the destruction of the world.

I'm not sure about that.

I am. I love you.

You too.

It doesn't stop the dreams. That night, he has the worst one yet.

Draco kisses him, Draco won't stop kissing him, Draco's hands become Bellatrix's hands ripping off his shirt and then finally becomes Tom.

"You are broken, you pathetic thing," Voldemort cradles his face and croons in parseltongue. "Tell me what you want me to do with you, my little weapon. Ask me and I will grant it."

Harry knows exactly what he wants. He doesn't want to be this anymore. This creature that can cause such terrible damage without even meaning to. He doesn't want to be a dangerous creature.

"Kill me," Harry stares into those red eyes and knows they'll be the last thing he sees. He doesn't care. "Kill me please."

Voldemort smiles and now he's not Voldemort anymore he's Tom Riddle as he was in the Chamber of Secrets, smiling widely and pointing his wand at Harry.

"Just you and me, Harry," he whispers. "Just you and me."

All Harry sees is the end of a familiar wand.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The flash of green light.

Nothing.

Just nothing. Then a stinging green song behind his eyes, spreading fast into every inch of his flesh, a terrible sensation of loneliness, so deep and impossible and no one coming, no one to comfort him.

A destroyed bedroom, a beheaded teddy bear.

A body on the floor, a fan of red hair around her head.

His own wails. His own cries.

Mummy.

“No!” Harry lurches awake. The sparks are too strong, he can smell singed bedsheets and doesn’t care. He’s sobbing, he can’t breathe. “No - No - Mum -,”

“Harrison,” Severus’ voice is urgent. Harry feels warm, dry hands clenched over his. “Try to calm down, you are at risk of starting a fire.”

“Mum,” Harry gasps. “Mum was - Tom killed me, I asked him to kill me and he did and Mum, she was - she was just *dead* just like she was - was in Godric’s hollow - I remember -,”

Severus takes in a sharp breath. Harry blinks in the darkness and realises Severus is sitting on the bed, holding both of Harry’s hands away from his body.

“I could destroy everything,” Harry can’t stop the weariness in his voice. “I’m a weapon. I’m like a fucking atomic bomb, I need to be decommissioned, I’m so fucking scared I’m going to hurt someone again.”

Severus doesn’t stop stroking.

“People are not bombs, Harrison,” Severus’ eyes are dark, fathomless, and endlessly comforting. “Creatures are not weapons. You have tremendous capacity inside you, and yes, perhaps it is capacity beyond what we have known before, but it is not inherently bad to possess that capacity.”

Severus presses his Lordship ring against Harry’s Prince ring. Instantly, shadows spool out around them. Severus looks at them with gentle amazement, because Harry knows he does not always see the shadows but his face when he does always makes Harry warm on the inside. “The *Ghare Tareaqi* is a shadow dimension. If I chose to, if I put my will to it, as the Lord of the House of Prince, I could find a way to open it wide enough that it could swallow us all.” Severus gives Harry a long, searching look. “Am I a weapon? Am I am bomb? Am I wrong for having this power?”

“No,” Harry shakes his head. “Because *you* don’t have it. The magic does. It ... it won’t do anything it doesn’t want to.”

Severus nods, eyes full of triumph.

“Do you remember what you told your godfather when he discovered you were the Black heir?” Severus asks. Harry frowns.

“Do you mean that time when Kreacher dropped the lamp on his head?”

“One of my fonder memories, yes,” Severus says without smiling but it makes Harry smirk, all the same. “You told him power is just magic. It is not moral.”

“It isn’t,” Harry says instantly.

“What is moral?” Severus presses.

“People,” Harry whispers. “Tom’s a shit because he’s shitty, not because he’s good at spells.”

“Language,” Severus says wryly. “But correct. Every day, all over the world, wixen channel and use and live with the immense, wild power of the natural world. It is not safe but you cannot *stop* being who you are because magic can be weaponised. This is what it means, Harrison, to be a magical.”

Harry stares at him. No one has ever told him this. It feels like a door is being opened in his mind, or it’s like the moment Hermione explains something to him and suddenly, something which seemed totally unfathomable is suddenly embarrassingly obvious. Harry can’t help blushing.

“People aren’t bombs,” he mutters. “I can ... choose not to explode.”

“In all the years your father has had lycanthropy, he has never hurt a human being,” Severus says. “He could, but he has not.”

“He nearly killed you,” Harry snorts. “And me.”

“But he *didn’t*,” Severus’ voice is uncommonly insistent. “If you have the potential to cause great harm you also have the potential to do tremendous good.”

“Yeah?” Harry whispers, feeling weak with gratitude.

Severus nods and slowly opens Harry’s hands, checking his fingertips for sparks.

“You are gifted in control, Harrison. You could not manage your mindscape without it, it is only that you have so much *more* to control. But like your father, I also believe in your abilities and above all else, your resilience,” he says quietly. It reminds Harry instantly of the time after the blood quill. He sighs heavily and nods. *Princes survive*. Severus leans towards the bookcase. It has filled in the last week.

“What would you like?” He asks.

“Something long,” Harry swallows hard. Despite his helpful chat with Severus, he won’t close his eyes again tonight. “I don’t care what it is, just make it long.”

Severus reaches for a well-worn copy of Anna Karenina. Harry thinks it’s Remus’ but when Severus opens the fly page, he smirks.

“What?” Harry asks.

Severus turns it towards him. Harry recognises that adolescent scrawl from his copy of Advanced Potions Making: *Property of S.S - do not steal, R.L!*

“I guess it didn’t work,” Harry smiles thinly.

“It never does,” Severus actually *chuckles* softly and turns a few more pages before beginning to read. “*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way ...*”

- - -

Are you in the Gryffindor common room?

Yeah.

Are you with Granger and Weasley?

Yeah, we’re just hanging out. Why?

No reason.

- - -

“What the fuck are they doing here?” MacLaggen yells. Harry rolls over on the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. It’s the weekend, thank God, so he doesn’t have to concentrate as much. He’s been lying with his head in Hermione’s lap, casually maintaining a Black shield around the sofa and Ron, who is sat on the floor, playing chess against himself. Harry knows that he shouldn’t be letting the Black magic go like this but he’s really fucking tired and he doubts that anyone in Gryffindor is going to run and tell Voldemort. *Besides, it’s just a shield,* Harry mentally protests against Severus. *Who cares about a shield?*

“I am here to see my intended,” Blaise says. Harry blinks a little and stares through the glittering silver shield. He wonders if this is it, if after a full week of only sleeping two hours a night, if he’s finally losing his mind. “Thomas was simply kind enough to let us in.”

“Mi,” Harry asks lowly. “Are Blaise and Theo and Daphne standing in the common room or have I finally gone barmy?”

Theo asked me where I was, that’s why I’m hallucinating this, Harry blinks, waiting for them to disappear. *This is a very odd dream.*

“No, they’re ... they’re really there,” Hermione drops her own copy of Anna Karenina onto her lap, narrowly missing Harry’s eye. He sits up. Through the shield, he sees Theo, *actual Theo*, raise his eyebrows. *Theo Nott, what the fuck have you been plotting?* Harry clenches his fist and the shield drops.

“Hi,” Harry tears his eyes from Theo to look at Blaise. “Um, you okay?”

“Just fine,” Blaise’s smile is so relaxed but Harry’s not fooled. He’s standing in between Daphne and Theo but they’re all stiff in the shoulders. *They’re flanking him,* Harry realises.

“Er, Come and sit with us,” Harry says, shuffling over as Hermione reaches for a nearby ottoman. “Then I can ...”

Harry flicks his fingers, the Black magic sparking in his ring.

“We would be delighted,” Blaise says, taking a step into the room.

“Um, *no*,” MacLaggen stands in front of Blaise, arms crossed. “You might be a Prince in Europe and in Slytherin, Zabini, but this is the *Gryffindor* common room. Fuck off.”

Harry feels a familiar grumble growing around the room. It’s been like this all week. They’re tolerating Harry mainly, Harry thinks, on the basis of a threat delivered from Ron on behalf of the twins and Ginny being very free with her Bat-Bogey Hex. This they won’t tolerate. Harry scrambles to his feet.

“It’s fine,” he reaches for his school robe. “Blaise, I’ll come out.”

“No,” Blaise says firmly, then drops his voice. “You are exhausted. Let us do this.”

Harry thinks his heart might actually burst as he stares at his fake-boyfriend, the girl who has agreed to be his friend again, and the love of his life stand awkwardly in the Gryffindor common room because they want to support Harry in his week of hell. He watches Blaise as he looks steadily around the room at the Gryffindors and raises his voice again.

“This is not about school houses, this is about alliances. This is about family,” Blaise says loudly. “The Zabini family has an alliance with the Families of Potter and Black because the Lord Potter-Black Apparent is my intended, and my intended has every right to be in this room, with me at his side.”

“So you’re visiting your little *boyfriend* because he’s too chicken to go back to Slytherin and face Malfoy after his muggle brawl?” MacLaggen sneers.

“They’re not even supposed to be here!” Lavender says loudly.

“They’re *allowed* to be here,” Hermione says fiercely. “There’s no rule to say that friends in other houses can’t visit one another, they just *don’t* because we’re wilfully living in some kind of feudal system where we hate each other based on our stupid uniforms.”

“You’re only saying that because you fancy Greengrass,” Parvati mutters. Hermione flushes but Ron jumps in.

“Right, because it’s so *weird* that two bookworms would want to be friends, just because they wear different *uniforms*?” Ron snorts. “Please.”

“Don’t be a mardy arse, Weasley,” one of MacLaggen’s friends calls. “Just because your girlfriend’s a Ravenclaw and you can’t eat her face off in the common room.”

“Actually, I’m not Ronald’s girlfriend, we don’t use those words,” Luna says dreamily from where she’s been sitting on the windowsill with Ginny all of the morning.

“How long have you been there?” Romilda Vane yelps.

“All day,” Ginny glowers at Vane. “So you all *don’t* care who’s in the common room, you only care because it’s Zabini.”

“No one notices me,” Luna chirrups happily and Ron throws her a look of utter delight.

“Yeah, because you’re one loopy Ravenclaw!” Hooper yells. “You’re not a bloody Slytherin *invasion!*”

“Can three Slytherins count as an invasion?” Theo mutters.

“If so, that’s pathetic,” Daphne says, which is possibly unhelpful and Romilda Vane glares at her.

“There’s *four* of you,” MacLaggen says furiously, pointing at Harry as he glares at Theo. “He doesn’t belong here, he’s not been a *proper* Gryffindor for ages and he’s a shitty Slytherin too! He’s *nothing!*”

Not nothing, Harry remembers Hogwarts saying. *Mine*. Harry sighs. *I am literally too tired for this shit*. Not only that, he is too exhausted to keep all of his magic inside. But it’s time. He’s knackered but Blaise and Theo and Daphne have done this, they’ve come into the literal lion’s den for him. He has to meet them half way.

“Right,” Harry pushes up his sleeves and flexes his fingers, trying to channel Magnus. “Let’s do this then.”

He feels the room take a collective gasp but doesn’t care. He’s careful to hold his wand prominently, but the Slytherin magic is roaring to make itself known and he lets it, casually trailing green sparks through the air out of his wand. Harry’s careful to channel it through, (*through not with*, Severus whispers inside his mind), but he doesn’t care too much about showing the Black magic, especially since all of Gryffindor have heard about the Wizengamot. He doesn’t need to look down at his exposed forearm to see the Black magic glowing out of his skin. And why should Harry be afraid of himself? *I’m not a bomb*, Harry

tells himself firmly. *I can stop myself exploding.* In the corner of room, Harry sees Neville stand up, pulling out his wand. He notices Dean, who swore a treaty last month twiddling his wand through his fingertips. Blaise catches Harry's eye and smiles. Harry remembers his words at the start of term: *These people will bear wands for you.* It seems like Blaise was right.

"I know you cursed someone in Hogsmeade with parseltongue," MacLaggen pulls his wand out of his pocket, eyes eager and cruel. "You're *dark* now Potter-Black, maybe you've always been dark, maybe its, like, a *family* thing."

"Like your fucking father," Seamus mutters, glaring at Harry. "Blacks are traitors. Everyone knows that."

A thought pops into his head: *What would Sirius do?* Harry grins. The answer is clear: *Be an arsehole.*

"Maybe I am dark, there are so many unknowns in the world, but you know what's *not* unknown? I could fucking clobber you with magic and no one would care because you're an absolute wankface," Harry says cheerfully to MacLaggen before looking at Seamus. "Maybe Blacks are traitors, but that's hardly a monopoly is it? After all, what do you call it when you act like someone's friend for four years and then turn on them because they find out they have a different *Dad*? Seems pretty fucking traitorous to me, Finnegan."

"Your *Dad* killed good people," Seamus snarled, his face red. "Twelve muggles, that's all anyone says, but I bet you didn't know, did you? One of them was my Da's cousin."

"And my Dad's cousin kidnapped me last year," Harry snaps back. He didn't know that about Seamus' family, glancing around the room he thinks the only person who possibly did know was Dean, but he doesn't feel sad. *Mainly because Sirius didn't fucking kill them.* "So that's my fault, is it? Because I'm fucking *related* to them they're decisions are *my* fault?"

"Blood matters!" Seamus snarls, his eyes glittering and his face red. "Your blood is a *curse*!"

"And Slytherins are the ones called blood purists," Theo mutters behind him.

"The hypocrisy," Daphne sneers.

"It's fine," Harry holds up his hand, silencing them both. "You don't want me? My half-Black blood is too cursed for you? Fine. Mi," Harry looks over his shoulder at Hermione. "You're Heir Potter. That's a nice *Gryffindor* name that everyone likes, since mine is clearly such a bloody problem."

"I am," Hermione glares at Seamus. "Proud to be."

"Your name is *Granger*," Lavender rolls her eyes. "You're muggleborn."

"Got something against a muggleborn heir? Really?" Harry drawls, twisting his wand through his fingers and shoving his other hand in his pockets, remembering this was how Sirius used to stand when he was being a deliberate pain. "You're all Gryffindors, aren't you?"

If you *hate* a pureblood Potter-*Black* heir, if my name's shit to you all, you can't possibly have a problem with the muggleborn heir and the political power she holds, can you?"

Harry catches Hermione's eye and feels the sharpness of her magic, can smell books and libraries and hear a song of a thousand voices screaming for representation. He grins and Hermione smirks back, more than ready for what comes next. Hermione squares her shoulders.

"I am Hermione Jean Granger of the House of Potter, the *muggle* sister with a wand," she says loudly giving Lavender a sharp, toothy grin. "Those in this room who will bear wands for my House and my Lord, show yourselves."

There is such triumph in her eyes. Little Nigel Wolpert is the first one with his hand up, glaring around the common room, and around them, hands and wands rise up. In addition to all his treaties last year, Katie has signed, along with the others Harry has played Quidditch with in the past, even just with the reserves like Kirke and Sloper and Demelza Robbins. Then there's the Creevy brothers and little Natalie McDonald, who is a friend of Nigel's. Harry's simply been signing things that Hermione puts in front of him. He didn't realise it had grown so much. He grins at her broadly. *Hermione, you fucking wonder*. MacLaggen glances around the room, face paling.

"You?" Seamus splutters, looking at Dean's raised hand.

"No," Dean's eyes are sad but his face is set. "I swore to Potter *and* Black."

"How could you do that, you FECKING DICK?" Seamus roars.

"Because Harry ISN'T his FATHER!" Dean yells back, and it seems like the argument that's been brewing all term is coming to a head. "And you're being a TWAT about it!"

Seamus abruptly turns and runs up the stairs to the dormitory. Dean stands there, breathing heavily.

"Nice going, Thomas," one of MacLaggen's friends sneers. "In Gryffindor, we don't let the murders of Gryffindor family members go."

"You shut the fuck up," Ron's eyes are furious. "When it's your Dad or your Mum or your Aunt then you get a fucking say, until then, work it up your *ruddy* arse."

"Well said," Neville folds his arms with a glare. "Ron and Ginny and I are friends with Harry we don't care that he's a Black, even though we lost parents. Deal with it."

"It's not about that," a tall, seventh year girl called Tasha says, giving Harry a stern glare. "Forget his family, *he's* dangerous. I heard about the Wizengamot and the *protego diabolica*. I don't care about politics, I don't want anything to do with this or him. He's not safe to be around."

Harry simply stares back at her. He thinks of Remus' words: *there are so few second chances for Creatures*. He's different so he's untrustworthy. He might have made mistakes and yes,

like Remus said, his mistakes are dangerous ones, but Harry's said sorry and he's trying to do better. He *is* safe to be around. *I'm not a weapon.*

"I like Harry," Nigel says loudly over the protests. "He's cool and funny and he's not a bully, unlike *some* people." Nigel glares at MacLaggen and his friends who all roll their eyes. "I think his friends can stay in the common room."

"Yeah," Dennis Creevey pipes up. "I don't get why we can't have boyfriends and girlfriends in the common room, anyway. It's boring having to meet up in the library."

"Shut up, beansprout," MacLaggen mutters. "Don't pretend you have someone who wants to snog you."

"He's got a girlfriend *and* a boyfriend, actually," Colin Creevey's wand is suddenly pointing at MacLaggen with ferocity in his face. "In Hufflepuff. So you don't know anything."

"I know that I can take *you*, Creevey," MacLaggen leers. "You want a bit of an argy bargy? Put your wand up!"

"Since you asked," Ginny snarls, pointing her wand at MacLaggen. Every Gryffindor in the room takes two steps backwards. Harry smirks and starts to feel like maybe, this might be quite a fun show. He catches Blaise's eye and tries not to smirk at the vague amusement he sees there. Both Theo and Daphne are just staring blankly at one another, as if they can't believe this is how Gryffindors actually talk to one another.

"Don't start with me, Weasley!" MacLaggen yells.

"Touch him and I will start with you," Ginny snaps, glaring around the room looking so much like Fred it's actually funny. "*Merlin's saggy balls*, can't we all just stay the fuck out of other people's business?"

"You're only saying that because everyone knows Granger dumped you because she fancies Greengrass," Parvati mutters but she quickly looks down when Ginny scowls at her.

"You don't know anything," Hermione shoots Parvati an angry glare and then looks around the room. "There is no rule that says they can't be here. Under the new anti-bullying regime the Head boy and girl have instigated, a prefect can take points from those in their house who they believe are discriminating on others based on house prejudice, race, gender, sexuality or blood prejudice."

"And we'll take ten points from everyone who says they can't be here," Ron says simply, putting his hands in his pockets. "And fifty points from anyone who hurts them."

"You'll tank the house cup!" One of MacLaggen's friends yells.

"Just doing my duty," Ron grins.

"You're a bellend, Weasley!" Someone yells.

“Oh, just LEAVE IT! Merlin!” Vicky Frobisher shouts over the outrage around the room. Everyone is silenced, because Vicky Frobisher does not shout. She is studious and quiet and wins more house points throughout the year than anyone else. She glares at Harry, she shoots daggers at Ron and Hermione and finally, she scowls at MacLaggen. “I won *thirty points* in Charms club yesterday. I won’t lose them because of this tosh.” She sits back down and pulls some homework towards her. “It’s not worth it. Let them stay.”

There is a rumbling of assent around the room and Blaise, as always, can sense the tide turning and deftly sidesteps MacLaggen as he splutters, taking Harry’s hand and walking with him back to the sofa.

“Well, that was quite a show, Granger,” Blaise says quietly, taking a seat on the sofa with Hermione and Daphne. “Well done.”

“Yeah, you were ace,” Harry sighs, sitting on the floor at Hermione’s feet. He flicks his fingers and the Black shield springs up around them. Those with treaties with Harry eye it appreciatively, those who don’t, glare at it. Harry finds he doesn’t care.

“Wanna play?” Ron asks Theo, putting the chessboard on the ottoman. Theo nods and sits on the other side of it, as Ron sits beside Harry. Under the cover of the ottoman, Harry’s foot can touch Theo’s knee.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Harry hisses softly. He feels warmth through the bond, spreading up through his leg.

We wanted you to know we are still all a team, words flit through the bond, even as Theo keeps his eyes on the chessboard. Harry smiles to himself and presses as much love as he can muster back through the bond, thinking of how Theo’s strong arms and hugs make him feel safe and precious and wanted. Theo accidentally knocks over a pawn and Harry thinks he sees a blush in his pale cheeks. Harry smirks happily.

“The Smith-Morra Gambit,” Theo mutters as Ron makes his move. “Pretty aggressive, Weasley.”

“Well, you’re an aggressive bloke, Nott, seemed suitable.”

“And you’re a knob,” Theo moves his pawn. Ron only grins and moves his knight.

“What are we reading?” Blaise asks above them.

“Hermione’s reading me *Anna Karenina*,” Harry says. “Helps me sleep.”

“In Russian?” Daphne asks.

“No, in English,” Harry rolls his eyes. “We’re about a quarter of the way through.”

“Then please, Granger, continue,” Blaise smiles at Harry. “I love Tolstoy.”

“Really?” Hermione sounds nervous.

“Yeah, Mi,” Harry yawns. “You’re a brilliant reader.”

“Come on, mate,” Ron pats his shoulder and Harry lowers his head onto it. He lets his eyes drift close. He listens to Hermione haltingly begin to read aloud only to be stopped in less than three minutes by Blaise’s commentary on the politics of Russia and later by Daphne’s distaste with the translation.

“Should have chosen the Bird’s Opening, Weasley,” he hears Theo mutter. “I’m going to give you such a bollocking.”

“We’ll see,” Ron says. “Your queen’s actually pretty loyal to me, oh, look! There she goes -,”

“This is a biased set!” Theo hisses. “Get back here, you traitor -,”

“It’s all gone arse over tit for you, Nott -,”

“Bugger *off*, Weasley -,”

Harry smiles to himself. Blaise had said this was about family. Right now, Harry believes him.

“This may not work,” Severus says.

“What have you done?” Harry looks nervously between him and Theo. It’s nearly ten o’clock at night on day seven and both Theo and Severus are looking frazzled and scorched from brewing most of the day. It’s odd seeing Theo in Severus’ quarters, feels kind of like a strange insurgence of normal life into a space that has belonged solely to Severus, Harry and Kreacher all week, so Harry knows they must have had some kind of break through. Theo places the potion on the coffee table in front of Harry, where they are both sitting on the sofa. It has a label with “Batch #35” on it.

“It has my blood in it,” Theo lifts his hand to show a plaster across his palm.

“Your blood?” Harry stares at Severus. “I thought you were kidding.”

“Not just Theodore’s blood,” Severus says. “Your blood also.”

“You have my blood?” Harry stares and then realises how stupid that is. Of course Severus has his blood. He’s probably got a fucking cupboard of shirts and bedsheets permanently stained with Harry’s blood.

“We believe that the combination of your blood, a magical component that bears a hint of your bond, will create a positive impact,” Severus says, lowering himself into his leather wing back chair and looking exhausted. “Circe willing.”

“It’s stable,” Theo says, nodding to the potion. “It should work. You just need to try.”

Harry looks at them both. They are so tired. So is he. There is a part of him just wants to stop. To give up and tell Severus he's had enough. It's time to go to Venice.

There is still work to be done, Master, you are not yourself yet.

Harry supposes that is as close to telling him to stay alive as Death gets. Harry looks at the potions vial. He will not be afraid of his power. He will not be afraid of living, either.

"Okay," Harry sighs, tipping the potion down his throat.

Harry wakes at three am, desperately thirsty. Severus is there, he's pulled one of the chairs from the kitchen table into Harry's room and jerks awake.

"Are you well?" He asks croakily, eyes wide as he waves his wand to look at Harry's vital signs over his ring. "Your heart rate and blood pressure are ... normal."

"Thirsty," Harry rasps out. "That's all."

If Severus had a normal face, it might collapse in relief. Instead, he simply hands Harry a glass of water and watches him drink.

"What did you dream?" He asks.

"Just birds," Harry gasps, finishing the glass. "Really nice birds."

Severus sighs and rubs his face. Harry sees this for the wearied exaltation it is and smiles.

"Can I take it every night?"

"Yes," Severus nods. "You will have to be very careful about consuming any other potions as the interactions are unknown, but yes, you can."

"And I can probably sleep in Gryffindor tower again now?" *With Theo, secretly*, Harry adds in his head. It's the first time in a week that Harry's actually *wanted* to sleep somewhere other than Severus' quarters.

"You can."

Harry watches him as he taps his wand against the glass and refills it. Harry sips. He's a bit too sleepy to try and work out what's going on in Severus' head when he looks at Harry like this: eyes dark and intense and a bit calculating. *Worry, maybe?*

"I'll be okay. Daphne and I are good now and Blaise can come into the Gryffindor common room and if I can sleep at night ... I'll be okay." Harry finishes drinking and sinks his head back down into his pillow. There's a delicious, warm, sleepy feeling that he hasn't had in ages. *And Severus made it happen.* "Thank you. Y'know. For everything."

“Thank your bonded.” Severus reaches forward to tug the blanket further up Harry’s shoulder. “It was his idea.”

It’s the first time Severus has ever called Theo that and Harry smiles, sheepishly. *Things are changing*, Harry thinks. As he closes his eyes again, blue birds sweep in gold sunlight behind his eyes. He thinks of Daphne being his friend again, of Blaise and Theo in the Gryffindor common room, of Severus and his endless brews and patient, kind nights of reading. Harry sighs happily. *Not all change is bad.*

Chapter End Notes

If you are struggling with your own edges and suicidal thoughts, please remember you are not alone. There is help to be had. We do not want to lose you and like Severus, we believe in your resilience.

If you exist as a woman or in a body that is perceived to be feminine or womanly by others, then you more than likely have your own experiences since childhood of being sexually objectified, made to feel unsafe, harassed, assaulted, raped or otherwise victimised.

The fact that I have presented these things as 'normal' in Hermione and Daphne's world is because they are normal. They were nastily normal in the UK in the 90's and they are horribly, horrifically normal today on a global scale. The numbers on a recent UN Women UK study in 2022 show that 97% of women in the UK have been sexually harassed. Women of Black, Black British or Mixed ethnicity are the most likely to experience sexual harassment and proportionally and rates of sexual harassment are higher for Trans women.

There are no global statistics that can give us a picture of the frequency of rape as a weapon of war. There is still so much more research and resources that must be dedicated to protecting women from the consequence of admitting it and gathering testimonies world wide. If you would like to research more about it:

<https://www.notaweaponofwar.org/en/war-rape/war-rape-in-the-world/>

if you are struggling with processing your own trauma, you are not alone. What happened to you does not deserve to be diminished or dismissed. You are a survivor. You are worthy of seeking help. If you are struggling to process a sexual abuse trauma - <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>

If you do not have personal experience of the type of trauma that is included in this chapter, please remember that there are people reading this story and reading the comments who do. Let's ensure that the comment space is a safe space for our friends and survivors.

Lessons with the Goblin King

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, lessons with the Goblin King.
Next time, party shenanigans.

Ward,

I expect your presence in Hogsmeade this coming weekend. Anzar Weasley will escort you from the castle. If she is willing, bring Heir Potter. I hear she has no notion of how to fight with the Potter magic. Now is the time to learn.

May all of your enemies suffer the blow of your axe

King Ragnok

King Under the Mountains and of the Goblin Nation of Great Britain, Chamberlain to the House of the Black Prince

Your Majesty,

We will be there. Shall I bring all the weapons or just myself?

May all of your enemies be shrivelled up by cursed artefacts you send in the post,

Your Ward

Lord Apparent Potter-Black and Heir Slytherin-Snape

Ward,

What a delight your letters are! I heard about the necklace of Harmonia. Next time, have Magnus Bane send it to us in the Silver Hall. I would do much to admire the handiwork of my Grecian brothers long ago.

A goblin who does not strap on as many concealed weapons as possible is no goblin at all, but for this meeting, you need only your axe.

Also, there is no need to dissemble in your letters to me. You may be the Potter Lord Apparent and Heir Snape, but we both know that there is nothing Apparent about your Slytherin or Black Lordships, whatever Magnus Bane may tell the Daily Prophet.

May all your enemies know your name in their last, bloodied thought.

King Ragnok

King Under the Mountains and of the Goblin Nation of Great Britain, Chamberlain to the House of the Black Prince

Your Majesty,

I didn't know if I was the Slytherin Lord for real. The person who told me I might be is not exactly ... present. If you don't mind me asking, your Majesty, how do you know?

May all of your enemies have their throats slit with your teeth,

Your Ward

Lord Black, Lord Slytherin, Potter Lord Apparent and Heir Snape.

Ward,

The monitoring systems of my ancient forefathers do not lie. We may not have the Slytherin Lordship ring in Gringotts but we know a Lordship has been claimed. In what seems to be a pattern, magic behaves around you in an unusual fashion. For better or worse, you are Lord Slytherin.

Do not worry, Lord Gaunt will not hear it from us.

Until the weekend,

King Ragnok,

King Under the Mountains and of the Goblin Nation of Great Britain, Chamberlain to the House of the Black Prince

- - -

Lord Potter-Black Apparent and Heir Zabini

You are invited to a Halloween soiree this Saturday the 30th of October at 7pm in my upstairs dining room. The dress code is festive, dress robes or your finest muggle garb are required, and the Weird Sisters shall be playing. I simply cannot wait to introduce you both to some of my dearest and oldest acquaintances, including some of my more vampiric companions! They are quivering with anticipation to meet my Golden Couple.

Yours,

Professor Slughorn.

- - -

“Do I have to go to this?” Harry moans as he walks out of the Hogwarts gates with Hermione. He waves the invitation in her face. “Because I really don’t want to go to this.”

“Yes, you have to go to it, Zabini will kill you otherwise.” Hermione rolls her eyes. “There’s Bill, did you know Magnus was coming?”

“No,” Harry grins. Standing on the other side of the gates are Bill and Magnus, looking like they’ve been swapping items from each other’s wardrobes so thoroughly Harry can’t actually tell what belongs to who anymore. “Hey!”

“Did someone order a half-daemon experienced in elemental magic for a lesson with the Goblin King?” Magnus sends Harry a flicker of a wink and opens his arms.

“Experienced? Is that what we’re calling ‘really fucking old?’” Harry gratefully gives him a sideways hug, happy to feel the warm magic of Magnus engulfing him.

“Such a rude, wayward child,” Magnus exclaims and then, under his breath asks: “All well, Little Mage?”

“Not bad,” Harry smiles, pulling back from the hug and getting a high five from Bill. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, aside from following William around and annoying him -,”

“You’re not annoying,” Bill smirks and puts a hand on the back of Magnus’ neck. “Not much, anyway.”

“I’m just here to make sure you’re in one piece,” Magnus says to Harry, comfortingly.

“Yeah, I am,” Harry says. Things have been much better since Severus and Theo got the potion sorted. He looks down at Magnus’ trousers. They’re purple jeans and don’t look like his. “Are these new?”

“Courtesy of Auror Tonks,” Magnus says and Harry sees Bill smirk out of the corner of his eye.

“Come on,” Bill says, jerking his head down the path towards Hogsmeade. “His Majesty awaits.”

They set off down into the village.

“How’s arithmancy going this year, Hermione?” Bill asks.

“Oh, it’s great!” Hermione enthuses. “Greengrass and I have been looking into this new sequence from Roman times that Professor Vector is very excited about -,”

Bill and Hermione start to walk ahead, Bill is smiling down at Hermione as she waves her hands and launches into an explanation.

“What’s this?” Magnus points at the invitation and Harry hands it over with a groan. Magnus quickly reads it, his eyebrows shooting up.

“A vampire?” He says. “I wonder who he’s got.”

“It’s not going to be Camille is it?” Harry asks nervously.

“No, Camille is in New York,” Magnus hands the invitation back. “It’s always a good idea to keep an eye on your exes.”

“Especially when they’re murderous vampires,” Harry mutters.

“Precisely,” Magnus chuckles. “Are you going to go to the party?”

“I have to, according to *Hermione!*” Harry says, yelling the last word at Hermione’s back who turns round to roll her eyes at Harry.

“It’ll be fun!” Hermione calls back.

“Of course you think that, you’re going with Daphne!”

“Oh really?” Magnus’ eyes perk up with interest. “An evolution of the not-date in Hogsmeade?”

“Yes, sort of,” Hermione looks nervous.

“Yes, definitely,” Harry grins. “She’s just freaking out about it.”

“You’re freaking out, Hermione?” Bill smiles at her.

“No, I’m not, I’m not, I just -,” Hermione stops walking and then shoots Magnus a desperate glance. “I don’t know what to *wear*.”

“Ah, Miss Granger, Heir Potter, my dear Hermione, say no more!” Magnus claps his hands and threads his arm through hers, strolling off together. “Describe to me your *perfect* outfit for your first date with Miss Greengrass ...”

“Well,” Bill smirks, falling into step beside Harry. “That should take care of that.”

“Oh yeah, Magnus’ wardrobe is insane.”

“I’ve noticed,” Bill laughs. “You should see our living room!”

Harry laughs and imagines that Bill and Tonks must be wading through piles of jackets and scarves to get to their sofas. He looks fondly at Magnus, who seems to be sketching in the air with his fingers and magic, outlining something with sparkling green light.

“Harry,” Bill says quietly. “Are you okay with Magnus being ...?” Bill presses a hand to his chest significantly. “With Tonks and I? I know he’s very important to you, your Steward and your family -,”

“Yeah, but you’re ... well, you’re important too, right?” Harry kicks a stone and blushes, a bit afraid to meet Bill’s eyes. “I mean, Ron’s always kind of let me borrow you all ... Sorry, that’s probably really weird.”

Harry doesn’t want to think about how much it has mattered to him over the years, knowing that Bill and Charlie and Fred and George would treat him just like they treat Ron.

“It’s not weird,” Bill’s voice is soft and Harry risks shooting a look up at him. He’s smiling at Harry the same way he smiles at Ginny sometimes. “We’ve always been happy to be borrowed.”

“Cool,” Harry mumbles, feeling quietly overjoyed. “So, yeah, you’re both, like, my brothers and I’m happy you make each other happy ... even though I suppose it *should* be weird if two of my brothers hook up -,”

“Let’s not push the comparison too far,” Bill laughs. “Tell me about this party.”

“I don’t want to go,” Harry grumbles. “Everyone’s gonna stare at me and I can’t even go with Theo, but Blaise says we have to go for politics.”

“Well, Horace Slughorn is known for his ability to fill a room with people of influence,” Bill says drily.

“Code for the most boring party ever,” Harry mutters.

“Yes,” Bill nods. “But it is an opportunity to make allies and we need those right now.”

Harry’s stomach lurches. In the last two weeks, he’s been so caught up in what’s been happening at school, with Draco and Daphne and barely being able to sleep, that he’s not thought much about the world beyond the castle.

“Do we?” Harry asks quietly. Bill shoots him a sharp look.

“Have Severus and Remus spoken to you about the Wizengamot and ...?” Bill trails off. Harry shakes his head.

“No, I’ve been kind of ...” Harry waves his hand beside his head, trying to explain with his fingers how horrifying all the nightmares had been. “They’ve been trying to keep me ... level. But George writes to me about stuff to do with the heirs and shit like that, but y’know, Mags is in charge of the Wizengamot stuff.”

“Magnus is doing an amazing job holding the Black seat,” Bill says. “It’s made a big difference to have such an influential seat voting with the Light faction most of the time but the bills that are being introduced are forcing the Wizengamot to be more and more divided.”

“What does that mean?” Harry frowns.

“Lucius Malfoy is pushing issues that have been languishing under a moderate approach since the last war. The legislation surrounding creature rights, for instance, it’s not been *good* since the last war -,”

“It’s bloody shit,” Harry mumbles.

“Yes, it is,” Bill says. “But it’s shit in the way that it’s not what anyone really wants, which is always the sign of a political compromise. Now Malfoy is pushing legislation that is definitely *not* what we want and is exactly what Voldemort wants. It’s actively oppressing creatures.”

“Like the anti-werewolf bill,” Harry nods.

“We stopped the anti-werewolf bill but it hasn’t helped us, because Malfoy is chipping away at werewolf rights through different modifications to other laws that require creatures to identify themselves for mortgage applications, to reveal their status on bank loans, to identify themselves to employers that aren’t the same creatures as them -,”

“How many employers are werewolves?” Harry demands. “That would be *impossible* for Remus -,”

“And for lots of others,” Bill nods. “But whilst some neutral Lords maybe wouldn’t pass these laws when they’re aimed at werewolves, they *will* for creatures they’re more prejudiced against, like vampires, for example. So they vote for them.”

“So he’s lumping all creatures together to play on people’s fears?” Harry asks, thinking that sounds exactly like a plan Tom would come up with.

“Yes,” Bill nods. “It’s deliberately planned to force the neutral seats to pick a side, to align their values with the Ministers and implicitly Voldemort, and unfortunately, several of them are leaning towards him. There is a lot of chatter about the upcoming Lords.”

“Like Theo?” Harry asks, his heart beating fast.

“Yes. The Mulciber heir took his seat this month, which is one more Death Eater Lord. Nott is the next upcoming Lord and it will be significant to have another Grey Lord in the neutral block.”

“There’s a lot riding on him then?” Harry asks tentatively, hoping Bill will say no, but he doesn’t.

“Yes.” he nods firmly. “With the Nott seat and the Greengrass seat voting in tandem against Voldemort, it will hopefully give the neutral block more confidence to follow them.”

“I guess I should go to the party then,” Harry sighs. “And be, like, political and helpful. If I can. Besides, Blaise will fucking kill me if I don’t. He keeps sending me fancy suits.”

Bill smiles down at him in bemusement.

“Be yourself, Harry,” Bill says. “Wear the suit. You’ll be fine. And don’t drink too much.”

“Mags drinks all the time,” Harry protests.

“He’s been drinking for literally hundreds of years, he can drink *anyone* under the table and still negotiate a ceasefire,” Bill laughs. “Don’t try to be Magnus.”

Not for another hundred years at least, Harry thinks to himself but doesn’t voice that to Bill. Instead, he asks questions about the Wizengamot, trying to understand the different votes and the different bills and how it all works but he already knows he’s not going to remember most of it. He wonders if he can ask Severus to explain it all to him in a way that makes more sense to him, something he can see or touch. By the time they get to the Shrieking Shack, Harry’s mind is spinning.

“Harry!” Hermione skips back to him, her face shining with excitement. “Magnus has got the *perfect* outfit for me for tonight! Can you send Kreacher to pick it up?”

“Yeah sure. Kreacher!”

Kreacher pops into existence beside Harry. He’s scoffing monster munch and his face is covered in orange dust.

“What does Master want?” Kreacher snaps, looking Harry up and down and then looking at Bill. “Does Master have snacks?”

“You’re *eating*.”

“Master’s statement is irrelevant,” Kreacher smacks his lips. “Snacks?”

“Here, Kreacher,” Hermione pulls a sweet out of her pocket. Kreacher grabs it eagerly. “Can you go to Bill’s house and get an outfit for me please, Kreacher? Can you put it in my dormitory? Magnus says it’s in -,”

“In the wardrobe in the second bedroom,” Magnus says. “Purple dry cleaning bag next to Nymphadora’s best set of Auror robes.”

“He won’t be able to get through the wards,” Bill says and Kreacher gives him the evil eye.

“Kreacher can overcome puny goblin wards and will do as Master’s Potter sister asks,” Kreacher mutters. He unwraps the sweet and pops it into his mouth. He coughs and gives Hermione a dirty look.

“Sweet is strange tasting,” he mutters.

“Yeah, it’s sugar-free,” Hermione says. “My Mum likes them.”

“Aw, Kreacher,” Harry grins, folding his arms. “You were fooled.”

“Is worst than lime fruity pastilles,” Kreacher growls at him and pops away.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione looks baffled. “It was a sweet!”

“He shouldn’t be able to get through the wards,” Bill mutters, shaking his head and giving Harry a significant look. “He’s an unusual elf.”

“Well, has there ever been an elf powered entirely by sugar and MSG?” Harry asks, following Hermione and Magnus into the woods. “Because that’s what powers Kreacher.”

“That and murderous intent,” Hermione mutters.

“Good morning Ward!” The Goblin calls loudly when they reach the clearing.

“Morning, your Majesty,” Harry raises his hand awkwardly. “May all your enemies piss themselves when they hear your voice!”

“Excellent,” the Goblin King claps his hands together with a laugh. Harry looks at the people with him. It’s an odd group - King Ragnok is accompanied by Griphook and Tonks (Harry’s not sure what they’re doing here) - and two guards standing at the edge of the clearing, their backs turned to them all, watching the forest for intruders.

“Hey Tonks,” Harry says.

“Wotcher, Harry, Hermione,” she says with a wink. Harry’s pretty sure Tonks is wearing Magnus’ velvet blazer again. “I’m here on his Majesty’s request as a member of the House of Black.”

“Shapeshifting, Ward!” The Goblin King barks. “Who could be more helpful than a Metamorph and you *have* one, in your house! She will not share your secrets if you ask her.”

“Okay,” Harry looks at Tonks awkwardly. He feels the Black magic in his ring, sending chills down his arm. Magnus squeezes his shoulder encouragingly. “Please don’t tell anyone about this, even ... your Mum.”

Tonks’ hair weirdly turns suddenly black and curly, like Bellatrix’s and her Mum’s, before she shakes her head and the curls turn bright pink.

“Got it,” Tonks says, still shaking her head side to side like she’s got water in her ears. Slowly, her hair straightens out and shortens. “Wait a tic, the Black magic always pushes me into my own form when I take a vow.”

“Sorry,” Harry mutters. “About your ... Mum too.”

“Don’t worry, Harry, there are lots of things my Mum doesn’t know,” Tonks chuckles, throwing a wink at Bill and Magnus snorts with laughter. Harry rolls his eyes.

“Hey, Griphook,” Harry waves. “May all your enemies have their eyes eaten by Parvus Pixies.”

Griphook smiles tightly but says nothing.

“Speak,” King Ragnok waves his hand, permitting it.

“Inventive, Ward, may all your enemies feel the steel of your blade,” Griphook chuckles. “I am here for Heir Potter.”

“For me?” Hermione frowns.

“Yes, Heir Potter,” Griphook nods. “I have served many Potter Lords and their Heirs, I have helped them learn how to use their conduits and to bend the Potter magic to their will. I will serve you too.”

“And I’ll help,” Bill claps a hand on Hermione’s shoulder. She smiles at him nervously.

“I’m not like Harry,” Hermione says. “I don’t know if I can even use the magic in the Potter ring, I mean, it’s not like it’s the Potter *heirship* ring.”

“Ordinarily that would be true, but Harry is unusual,” Magnus says with a laugh. “The magic inside it makes it the Potter heirship ring.”

“Yeah,” Harry frowns. “I asked the Potter magic to find you, I named you my heir when Voldemort melted my ring -,”

The goblins all growl at the implicit insult.

“And that worked?” Tonks raises her eyebrows.

“The less you think about how Ward communicates with magic the better, Auror Tonks!” King Ragnok says. “Now, Anzar Weasley and Griphook will support Heir Potter in her learning, and Auror Tonks and I will support Lord Potter-Black.”

“And I’ll just watch and comment,” Magnus says, pulling a flask out of the pocket of his long, blue velvet coat and taking a sip.

“Must you?” the Goblin King rolls his eyes and Magnus just salutes him merrily.

“You’re up, Hermione!” Magnus says. “Show us what you’ve got!”

“Okay,” Hermione looks nervously at Harry. “Any tips?”

“Um ... the Potter magic likes family, likes connection, likes warmth,” Harry shrugs. “Think about us, I guess? Our family, what family means to you?”

“Don’t all family magics like family?” Hermione frowns.

“No, they’re different,” Harry shakes his head. “The Black magic cares about justice and legacy and it protects its own but it doesn’t ... it’s fierce, it’s intensely loving, but it doesn’t feel warm ... right?”

Harry looks to Tonks for guidance.

“It’s definitely not warm,” Tonks puts in thoughtfully. “I don’t have access to the same kind of knowledge as you do, Harry, but when the Black magic was freed and you took your lordship, I felt *cold*. Like standing on ice. And powerful. When I morphed at the Ministry ...”

“You were amazing,” Harry said fervently. “You were a bird and Bellatrix and so many things so quickly -,”

“Which is unusual, the magic gave me a boost I didn’t expect,” Tonks shook her head in confusion. “Magnus?”

“I’m put in mind of something Lord Black told me in the 17th Century - the Black magic is wild and cold and sharp as a knife. Now I am its steward, I know what he meant.” Magnus turns to Hermione. “What does the Potter magic feel like?”

“It’s warm, it’s - it’s very loving,” Hermione blushes and looks at Harry. “I sometimes ... when Harry’s using it with me, I can feel stuff from the past.”

“That’s unique to Harry,” Magnus says.

“Yes, it will not do to try to emulate Lord Black,” Griphook says. “It might help you to know, Heir Potter, the motto of the House of Potter.”

“We have a motto?” Harry is amazed.

“*Quod Ardet Oritur*,” Griphook says.

“What does it mean?”

“That which burns, rises,” Hermione translates.

“You’re quick with your Latin,” Griphook nods approvingly.

“Hermione’s quick with most languages,” Bill smiles and Hermione blushes. It seems that no matter how much she is into Daphne, Bill will always have the ability to make her flush. *Like everyone else on the planet*, Harry thinks drily.

“That’s why the Potter magic likes phoenix forms,” Hermione’s mind is clearly running away with herself. “Because they represent transformation through burning.”

“Many heir magic uses a word or phrase to bring the magic into a particular form. Whilst Lord Potter-Black does not need them, you could perhaps utilise them.”

“Which particular form?” Harry demands.

“The Potter shield.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry nods at Hermione. “You can do this, I bet you can.”

“The word is *ignis*,” Griphook says, gesturing for Hermione to hold out her left hand.

“Heirship rings are conduits, just like wands. Just as you direct your will to your wand and the ingredients within it cause a magical reaction which responds to your will, so the Potter magic will respond if the right words are said. “Heir rings and Lordship rings are *usually* limited conduits,” Griphook fixes his eyes on Harry with a deadpan stare. “Unlike wands.”

“That’s - that’s how rings are supposed to work?” Hermione stares at Harry. “You are *really* strange, aren’t you?”

“Hey!” Harry protests as Hermione grins slyly. “Rude!”

“Let’s not judge folks by their ability to do magic with rings, shall we?” Magnus smirks, flicking his fingers so sparkling birds, made of blue magic, circle around his head.

“As we said, it probably does not help to use Ward or Steward Bane as a comparison,” Griphook smiles at Harry who shrugs.

“I just ask it for what I want,” he says with a shrug. “If it’s up for it, it happens. Easy peasy.”

“Lemon squeeze!” Magnus adds, sending his birds of magic towards Harry who directs the Black Magic to them, turning their wings to ice that ring and sing as they flap. The Goblin King snorts with laughter.

“Which rather reiterates my point,” Griphook says sarcastically.

“Here, Hermione,” Bill takes hold of Hermione’s shoulders and stands behind her. Harry smirks to watch her flush deepen. “The Weasley magic is just like the Potter magic, we have

a word that works for the Lordship ring. I don't need to say it anymore but as a demonstration... *cosnaíonn!*"

Yellow light leaps out of the blue stone ring on his hand, forming a barrier of light around him and Hermione that is full of ancient symbols. Hermione stares at it with wide eyes and then, Harry smiles to see a familiar picture of determination come into her features.

"Irish magic," the Goblin King nods approvingly. "You honour your Clan, *Anzar* Weasley."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Bill says, clenching his hand and the shield disappears. "Your turn, Hermione. Just like Griphook said."

Hermione stretches out her hand, cupping it upwards.

"*Ignis*," she whispers. Nothing happens. She looks devastated.

"You're holding your hand wrong," Harry stretches out his hand, palm held flat up against anything that might come towards him. "Like this. You need to hold it like you *need* it, like you would in battle. The Potter shield is defensive, it's like, you *hold* the shield upwards, and you use it to stop things coming towards you. It doesn't cover you on all sides like Bill's did, just the front."

"Like a real shield," Tonks says encouragingly. "Like the suits of armour in Hogwarts."

Hermione nods, resolve etched into her face and holds her hand out flat as if she's about to stop traffic.

"Widen your stance," Bill murmurs, pushing his boot against Hermione's trainer, guiding her into a different position. Hermione sends Harry a wild, slightly scandalised and overjoyed look and Harry has to clap a hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing out loud. Both Magnus and Tonks seem to share an appreciative but amused look.

"Problem, Mi?" He grins.

"Shut up, Harry Potter," Hermione mutters irritably and fixes her eyes on her Potter ring. "*Ignis!*"

A faint flame appears around her hands, drawing a pale circle, the outline of a future shield, before disappearing.

"Excellent attempt!" Magnus says, sipping his flask. "Point to Hermione!"

"Oh, we're doing points?" Bill says, giving Magnus a mock-stern stare.

"Well done!" Harry claps enthusiastically. "That was *brilliant*, Mi!"

"Oh, shhh," Hermione smiles at him and rolls her eyes. "You can make literal Griffins out of elemental magic and I can make my hand glow."

“I don’t *make* magic do anything, it does stuff through me,” Harry says and both King Ragnok and Griphook raise their eyebrows. Magnus chuckles.

“Keep doing you, HP,” he grins.

“Try again,” Tonks says encouragingly.

“How do I make it ... more?” Hermione frowns, glancing at Harry. He shrugs.

“I dunno, really. The only time the Potter shield ever came for me was when I really *needed* it, like I needed to be protected and I was thinking about that. Protection and stuff.” He looks at Magnus. “Sirius, that time he ... you know. Spattered you.”

“Ah, yes,” Magnus winces, winding his arm. “Thank you for that, Puppy.”

“Ward makes a good point,” Griphook says softly. “Magic is not only theoretical. It is necessary. *Anzar* Weasley, if you would.”

Bill moves from his position behind Hermione to in front of her, his wand outstretched.

“What are we doing?” Hermione’s voice is suddenly nervous.

“Making it necessary,” Griphook says. “We are not in the classroom, Heir Potter.”

“But I haven’t done it yet,” Hermione begins, frowning hard. “I’m not ready, I’m not -,”

“*Flipendo*,” Bill calls, lazily twitching his wand.

“*Ignis!*” Hermione shouts. The shield quivers, becoming brighter and Hermione only stumbles with the lingering impact of Bill’s flipping jinx.

“Point to Bill!” Magnus calls and when Hermione shoots him an angry expression adds hastily, “but it was an excellent first attempt!”

“Well done!” Harry claps and Hermione rights herself, glaring at Bill with an expression between exasperation and excitement.

“I wasn’t ready!” She protests.

“That was the point,” Bill grins.

“Go again,” Griphook says and Harry smirks to see how quickly Hermione alters her stance, her whole body tense with conviction. Tonks smiles and catches Harry’s eye.

“That’s our Hermione,” she says quietly. Harry nods.

“Magic is ninety percent what, Miss Granger?” Magnus calls.

“Intention,” Hermione says with gritted teeth, but when Bill jinxes her again, this time she staggers less and the shield is a little stronger.

“Should have been a teacher,” Magnus sighs.

“You teach me stuff, Mags,” Harry grins, casually shooting a small burst of the Slytherin magic towards Magnus, who shields himself with a flick of his finger whilst drinking from his flask.

“Stop showing off!” Hermione yells at them both, her brow sweaty with the exertion of making her shield.

“The Potter magic is a useful magic for combat,” King Ragnok comments beside Harry.

“Really?” Harry cocks his head to stare at Hermione as the shield starts to get stronger. “Of all of the magics I’ve met, the one that wants to fight most is the Slytherin magic. It loves to battle.”

“Fire is always useful in combat,” King Ragnok says. “You’ll have heard about inferi?”

“Yeah, zombies,” Harry shrugs. “As long as they’re not fast I’m not bothered.”

King Ragnok tips back his head and roars with laughter.

“Well, they may not be fast but they are insistent,” he chuckles. “They are quelled by fire.”

“Anyone ever tried shooting them in the brain?” Harry smirks, thinking of the zombie movies Dudley likes to watch.

“With what spell?”

“Never mind,” Harry rolls his shoulders and looks at Tonks who grins and winks at him. He remembers she has a muggle dad.

“Night of the Living Dead, right, Harry?”

“Good film,” Harry says.

“Duane Jones,” Magnus sighs. “Excellent kisser.”

“*What?*” Both Harry and Tonks demand, but King Ragnok claps his many-ringed hands and turns to Harry.

“It’s your turn now, Ward.” He says, gesturing for Harry to move a little further away from Hermione, so Magnus is leaning against a tree between them. “Begin.”

“Begin what?”

“Transform.” King Ragnok gestures up and down Harry’s body. “As you did at the Wizengamot.”

Harry stares at him for a long time, waiting for further instruction but it doesn’t come.

“I ... um... I don’t know how I did that.”

“Wings time, Harry,” Magnus grins. He has put his flask away and pulled out his cigarette. “I wait with breath that is baited.”

“You wait with breath that’s full of tar and nicotine,” Harry retorts and Magnus snorts with laughter.

“Touché.”

“Remember your thoughts from when you transformed, Harry. Changing form begins in the mind.” Tonks suggests.

“Okay.”

Harry closes his eyes and thinks back to that moment. He recalls everyone’s derision, Theo’s words pressed through the bond. *If you can’t tell them who you are, show them.* Then he remembers the coldness of the Black magic eking up through his body, and thinks of the Black Prince’s sparkling eyes inside his mind. *Oh, we have such power to show.* With a rush of ice throughout his whole body, Harry feels it.

“Well,” Bill’s voice sounds amused. “That’s even more impressive in real life.”

Harry opens his eyes to find everyone staring at him. He looks over his shoulder and the huge, wings of the Black magic are around his shoulders, made of white magic and gleaming brightly. Harry is suddenly very happy they are in the forest and far away from anyone in Hogsmeade.

I must look like a right twat right now.

“Bravo!” Magnus claps, his cigarette hanging off his lip.

“You look very pretty, Harry!” Hermione giggles.

“Piss off and do your shield,” Harry scowls at her.

“Well done, Ward!” King Ragnok says, nodding approvingly. “Now move them.”

Harry looks over each shoulder and thinks: *move*. Nothing happens.

“They don’t feel real,” Harry stares at the wings made of magic over his shoulder. He can’t even feel them touching him. “Like, they’re not connected to my body.”

“They look attached,” Magnus says. “I feel like I should take a photograph for a certain someone.”

“Don’t you dare,” Harry points at him threateningly, though his stomach does churn at the possibility of Theo seeing him this way. *Will he like it?*

“You need to believe they’re attached, Harry.” Tonks smiles. “You need to believe in your transformation. That’s how metamorphs direct their powers. We believe in the possibility and visualise it into reality.”

“I can do visualising.”

It's no different to his mindscape, really, his library and his books and his lake. Instead, he remembers the Black raven's wings as they wrapped around Sirius in Grimmauld Place to stop him from turning into an Obscurus. He remembers the coldness of them, the tenderness and power, like being close to a snowstorm. The wings flap and Harry feels it, in the muscles of his shoulder blades. *Holy shit, they're really connected.*

“I did it!” Harry gasps. “Holy fuck! Hermione! I flapped my wings!”

“I made a proper shape!” Hermione yells back, a red fiery solid circle in front of her. Not a shield yet, but certainly getting there.

“Awesome!” Harry grins and gives her a thumbs up. His wings stretch as he does so and she giggles.

“You like an angel!” She giggles.

“Shut up, I *don't* -, ”

“You do, it's adorable -, ”

“Mi, I am *not* adorable -, ”

“Let's get back to it,” Tonks interrupts. “Harry, this time, you need to think about your form.”

“What form?”

“Well, what form does the magic want to take?”

“Raven,” Harry doesn't even have to think about it. He looks at King Ragnok who is smiling slightly, as if this is what he'd expected. “The Black magic is a raven.”

“Yes indeed,” Magnus' voice has lost all of its playful vigour. He looks at Harry fondly but also a little bit sadly. “They are coming to you.”

Harry wonders how much Magnus sees of the future, remembering the Black Prince's promise to send his ravens to him when he goes to war.

“Or I'm coming to them,” Harry says. Magnus gives him a broad smile and puffs smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

“Our Lady will be most pleased,” he says and Harry smirks, because he's not sure he's ever seen Death be ‘pleased’ about anything, really.

“Enough of riddles, Steward. It is time to listen, Ward,” King Ragnok says, stepping closer. He notices that as he does, Tonks becomes focused on Hermione, as if her attention has been completely diverted. Magnus has become fascinated with Hermione too, calling out points

between her and Bill like Harry suddenly isn't there. Harry thinks it could be a spell.
"Remember what we spoke about at Gringotts? That you hear the songs."

"Yeah," Harry remembers the conversation that had been somehow unable to be heard by Remus or Severus. This must be a similar thing. "Goblins hear the songs of mountains and conduits and they make magic with music."

"Well done," King Ragnok gives him a wintry smile. "The Black magic has a song, does it not?"

"Yeah."

"You must listen to it," King Ragnok nods.

"That's it?" Harry says doubtfully.

"There is a song in your own blood, in your own magic," King Ragnok says. "When you listen, you must learn to blend."

"The songs?" Harry says blankly.

"Goblins understand the transmutation of raw elements, how water becomes air, how fire transforms stone. You must transmute your form into that of a raven."

"That ... doesn't make much sense to me."

Harry feels stupid and thinks hard. He remembers what Severus taught him about having an Attention Disorder.

"Sometimes, I need ... I need a picture in my head," Harry says awkwardly. "To help me understand."

King Ragnok nods and thankfully, doesn't seem bothered by this.

"In our culture, we would say that you must hammer your own magic until it is transformed, just as we beat the steel until it is the sword."

"I don't want to force magic to do anything."

"Yes, I see that about you," King Ragnok looks him over thoughtfully, in the uncomfortable way he sometimes does when he looks at Harry like both a puzzle and a prize. "We also say that magics that melt together in the heat of the flame, like mithril and steel, are stronger when they are cooled."

"So I need to ... melt into the magic?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Harry nods firmly. That's an image he can work with. "I'll try."

He closes his eyes again and remembers what it was like with the poison in Grimmauld place, how he visualised it and pushed it back out of his blood. He wonders if he can do it in reverse. So he thinks about the ice of the black magic flooding through him, he feels the coldness of it climbing up into his lungs and trying to steal his breath. Still, Harry pushes it away, pushes it towards his back so the ice spreads over his muscles and suddenly, Harry can feel movement in his wings.

When Harry opens his eyes and looks down, he is three feet off the ground.

“Oh shit, oh shit!” Harry yells.

“Well done, Harry!” Magnus calls, clapping down below. They can all see him again and Harry’s a little bit annoyed because he feels like an absolute numpty.

“Thanks!” Harry calls back, looking over to Hermione. “Mi! HERMIONE! I’m flying!”

“You are!” Hermione yells back with a grin. “Don’t get blown away!”

“You are not allowed to tell *anyone* about this!” Harry yells back, unsteadily pedalling his legs like he’s on a bicycle. “I think I’m stuck!”

“Calm down,” Tonks says and a pair of wings spring from her back. They are brown, like a sparrow.

“Lovely metamorphosing, Tonks!” Magnus says and Harry’s sure he sees Tonks send him a flirty wink before she flaps up and takes hold of Harry’s hands with a grin. “It’s in the mind, remember? Just ... bring yourself back down!”

Harry breathes heavily and realises that his back muscles *hurt*.

It’s because human bodies are not meant to fly, Greenheart, Sahara whispers to him. You must find the true form.

Shut up, you’re a snake, what do you know?

I know I can’t fly.

Harry ignores her and clenches his teeth, feeling like he’s asking his shoulder muscles to do something impossible as he stops flapping so hard and drifts back down to the floor.

“Welcome back to earth, HP,” Magnus says, toasting him. Harry smirks. Having Magnus here, throwing comments and smiling, it’s making all this feel much less pressurised, even in King Ragnok does look like he wishes Magnus was shut up.

“This was a good start, Ward,” King Ragnok says. “You have taken on the ability for flight, now you need to find the body for it. This time, melt towards the mind of the raven.”

“I don’t know many ravens,” Harry says awkwardly.

“It takes some imagination, Harry,” Tonks smiles. “That’s why metamorphosing and shapeshifting is different from being an animagus. An animagus fully becomes an animal. You and I, metamorphs and shapeshifters, just use magic to take a form, our minds are the same. You’re not becoming a real raven, you’re becoming a magical version of a raven created by your own magic.”

“Transmutation, exactly,” King Ragnok adds. Harry knows what he means. *Blend the songs. Melt into the magic.* “Try again.”

“Okay.” Harry takes a deep breath. This time, he listens hard for the song of the Black magic, a thousand voices singing low tones inside his mind and he allows it to reach a fever pitch inside him, flooding his whole system. For a split second, Harry is so cold he is worried he will stop breathing but then a sweet voice fills his mind: *Always loved, honoured Mage.* Harry’s not afraid. He lets the coldness of the magic steal his breath and freeze his lungs and he spreads his wings. Then everything is silent.

When he opens his eyes, he is not in Hogwarts. Death stands in front of him.

“Greetings, Master.”

“What am I doing here?”

“Magic is memory,” Death says quietly. “This magic you seek to understand carries this memory.”

Harry turns around.

An army is in the valley. Harry can see they are an army of the dead, of inferi but also of shadowed people.

“This is Mordred’s army,” Harry whispers, looking at the banners, the black hand painted upon them. “Right?”

“It is.”

Harry turns. He recognises Merlin, his dark skin and the sword at his side. Merlin takes a deep breath and spreads his arms wide, staring up at the sky.

“Free,” Merlin whispers.

Then he is gone and in his place, a flock of ravens, sweeping down over the valley towards Mordred’s army.

“It flies, it sees, it listens, it is memory and thought,” Death whispers as they watch the ravens swoop and dive. “It is free.”

“Freedom,” Harry smiles. “Flying is always freedom.”

“Well done, Harry!” Harry stumbles back to earth, staggering against Tonks and Magnus. He finds himself leaving against Magnus, relieved to smell the Frankincense of his magic. “Steady now, steady.”

“What happened?” Harry asks, his heart thundering. He can’t help but look over his shoulder, imagining that Mordred’s army is just behind him. “I - I was kind of, like, in the magic.”

“Your wings took a more realistic raven form,” King Ragnok smiles. “You flew a little, as before, but this time, there was an intense glow.”

“If you had stuck with it a little longer I think you would have shifted!” Tonks says, excitedly. “Even just for a second!”

“Cool,” Harry staggers slightly. “I - I think I need to sit down for a bit.”

“Come on,” Magnus says, guiding him to a tree stump. “You’re a bit overcharged.”

Harry looks down at his arms. He’s still glowing all over. He looks up at the Goblin King who has shed his long, ceremonial robe and hung it over the branch of the nearest tree. Underneath he is wearing silvery chain mail that Harry knows is made of that special stuff that only the Goblins use.

“That was a strong attempt, Ward, but sitting is not good, the magic must be utilised even when resting,” King Ragnok pulls out his axe. It’s double-headed and gold, encrusted with rubies on the handle that look like blood. “Now show me your paces.”

“I guess I’ll help Hermione,” Tonks says cheerily. “Have fun, *Anzar* Ward.”

“All well?” Magnus asks, taking hold of Harry’s hands and turning them over a few times. Harry can feel that Magnus is drawing some of the coldness of the Black magic out of him.

“Yep,” Harry grins. Harry draws his axe out of his back holster and happily feels his *Anzar* rune heat in his left hand as he grips it. “Gonna do some fighting.”

Magnus grins knowingly.

“Enjoy, HP!” Magnus claps him on the back and points at King Ragnok. “I’m putting my gold on my Lord, your Majesty, no offence!”

“None taken,” King Ragnok swishes his blade through the air. “But you will lose your gold.”

“Then it will be well lost,” Magnus grins. “I’m going to help Heir Potter learn some elemental magic.”

“Go for it,” Harry clicks his neck as he looks at King Ragnok and then performs the ceremonial bow, just as Bill taught him. “It will be an honour to cross blades with you, my King.” Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Bill and Griphook nod approvingly. Magnus puffs out smoke.

“Parry,” King Ragnok says, crashing his axe against Harry’s. Harry does, remembering everything Bill and Professor Flitwick have taught him. “Correct your footwork. Better. Have you enjoyed your lesson today so far?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Harry says, stepping back to re-engage. “It was helpful.”

“Do you feel powerful, Ward?” He asks sharply. “Show me an attack blow.”

Harry does. The King pushes back.

“Professor Flitwick’s technique is showing,” he frowns. “More force and less frivolity. Answer my question, Ward.”

Harry shrugs. He’s sleeping better, he’s getting used to life back in Gryffindor which is much better now that Blaise can wander into the common room mostly unmolested whenever he wants. He’s improved in his classes and whenever he’s feeling overwhelmed, he sleeps down in his bedroom in Severus’ quarters. But nothing changes the feeling that Draco is always present in the castle. Draco, whose memories he has rattling around inside him. Life in the castle is not comfortable and Harry wonders if it is ever going to be truly comfortable again. Learning to shapeshift, however, helps.

“I guess so,” Harry says. “I’m getting there.”

“Good,” King Ragnok says firmly. “I had intuited from sources that something occurred to make you feel less powerful this month.”

“Yeah,” Harry snorts, thinking of Draco. “You could say that.”

“Pass back, Ward,” King Ragnok commands and Harry moves his feet. “Quicker!”

Harry does it, noticing Bill watching him closely with a smile. Part of this quickness on his feet was learned on the football field in Rome and for a second, Harry smiles remembering Blaise shouting out to both of them: “You’ll be quicker without your shirts, I am sure!”

“Better. I am the Chamberlain to the House of Black as well as your King, Ward.” The Goblin King’s eyes are intense as he twirls his axe so it becomes a blur. *There’s a reason he’s the King*, Harry thinks admiringly. “You can confide in me if you instruct me as Lord Black to keep your secret. Has *Anzar* Weasley taught you to shed?”

“Yeah.”

“Demonstrate.”

Harry does, accepting the Goblin King’s heavy blow and letting his axe slide against Harry’s without impediment so Harry can quickly turn and attack. The Goblin King is too quick and easily parries, then catches Harry’s shoulder with his axe in a quick nick. Harry doesn’t even wince, though it stings. He knows better. Bill taught him that any blows given from the King’s axe are considered a great privilege. He cannot treat the wounds until the duel is over and even then, he will carry the scars as a badge of honour. *That’ll be a change, having scars I can be proud of.*

“I’m Lord Black,” Harry says breathlessly, holding his axe up and circling, just like Flitwick taught him. “And I want you to keep this a secret.”

“I understand the terms, Ward.”

King Ragnok steps back, holding his axe high to stop combat. Harry is grateful and lowers his axe. Taking a deep steadying breath, he stares up at the grey sky. It’s Halloween tomorrow. Soon, snow will be falling. Harry looks down at his left hand, holding his axe so steady, and pulls up the Black magic. *Privacy*, Harry thinks, and the Black magic forms a sparkling dome around them, just as it did in the Forbidden Forest with Theo, last year. On the other side of it, Harry sees Magnus send a flicker of a wink his way, even as he stands with Hermione and is waving his hands and making blue magic dance in front of her. Hermione is nodding at Magnus furiously, following his every word and Harry smirks to himself, just knowing that Hermione is internally losing her mind that she gets to learn from Magnus Bane, author of one of Daphne’s favourite books. Inside the shield, King Ragnok raises his eyebrows.

“Speak freely, Ward.”

“I ... I compelled my friend,” Harry says hesitantly. “I didn’t mean to but it ... was a big deal and then Draco, he’s under my Sanctuary, he ... pulled some shit. He wanted to get out from under my sanctuary and he ...” *Sexually assaulted you*, says Remus inside his head. Harry winces at that. “Wasn’t nice about it.”

“Sanctuary clauses are dangerous, Ward,” the Goblin King shakes his head. “You are not so secure in your lordship that you can be taking responsibility for others.”

“Not even to save his life?”

“Better he learns to save his own,” King Ragnok says.

“Yeah, well,” Harry sighs. “He ... whenever I look at him I feel the compulsion and I hate it, and I know that I can control myself, I know I don’t *want* to do it again, but I don’t know how to ... to *not* do it again. It’s so ...” Harry fumbles for the right word. He knows King Ragnok will not shame him for it. “Easy to compel. It’s harder *not* to, sometimes.”

“Hmm,” The Goblin King cocks his head. “Do you know why you compel?”

Harry shakes his head. Then he thinks of what Sahara said after Draco. *You trust magic more than people.*

“Advance with a pivot, Ward.” Harry demonstrates it, but fiddly footwork is not his forte. His Majesty nods curtly. “You could be more fluid on the turn.”

“Yeah, Flitwick says I’ve got all the grace of a drunken giant,” Harry smirks. “Why do I compel?”

“You fear not being listened to,” the Goblin King’s eyes are shrewd. “I would wager there have been many times in your young life when you have been voiceless, silenced, and have

suffered for it.”

“You’d ... win a lot of money on that bet,” Harry tries to joke. He steps back and twirls the axe through his hands. King Ragnok’s blade catches the edge of his, stopping it from progressing. He smiles sharply.

“What you need to learn, Ward, is that it does not matter if they don’t listen to your words, they will listen when they see your power. Then they will hang on every word,” King Ragnok says. “Goblins were not listened to by Wixen. We could have destroyed them, perhaps we should have, but instead, we took *power*. Something they covet more than magic.”

King Ragnok pushes Harry back and Harry defends himself, widening his stance and bending low. Goblins fight hand-to-hand combat close to the ground and Harry’s still getting used to it.

“Gold,” Harry whispers. King Ragnok nods before advancing, forcing Harry to move back, careful not to trip over his own feet.

“Now, it does not matter if they do not listen to my words, they will listen to my gold. They will listen to the precious metals that I make sing. They see my power and they quake, as they should. They will see you and quake also.”

“So if I care less about people listening to me -”

“Then you will not direct your magic towards *making* them listen, yes,” the Goblin King pushes Harry further back and Harry sends his weight into his back foot to absorb the crashing weight of King Ragnok’s blow. He’s stronger than Bill, stronger than Flitwick even and even with his *Anzar* rune, Harry can feel his body starting to shake. “Believe your own words, Ward. Believe in your own power. You do not need others to validate you with their ears. They cannot hear the songs anyway.”

“That’s true,” Harry does a quick duck just like Bill taught him to avoid blows and finds a more secure stance to defend himself. He can see out of the corner of his eye that Bill has stopped teaching Hermione and has come to stand on the edge of the Black shield, watching Harry carefully with his arms folded.

“Learn this, Ward,” King Ragnok attacks again, this time with even more power and Harry is forced to take more steps backwards with each blow until he’s down on one knee, determined not to wince. “Wixen listen to nothing but power. So do not be so precious with your words. They will hear them or they will not!”

Harry’s axe is pushed out of his grip and without thinking, Harry throws up his left hand. *Protect*. The Black shield jumps from being all around them to between them, cawing in Harry’s head like a raven as it shields him from King Ragnok’s blow. For a second, Harry worries that he’s done something terrible, used Wixen tools in a Goblin battle but King Ragnok smirks and leans on his axe, nodding at the shield.

“Power is all that matters to Wixen,” he says.

“There is only power and those too weak to seek it,” Harry mutters, lowering his shield. He doesn’t stand up. He knows he mustn’t, not until King Ragnok allows him. He can feel Bill’s blue eyes fixed on him approvingly.

“That sounds like something a Wixen would say,” King Ragnok snorts. He offers Harry one of his hands and Harry knows he can stand.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Harry bows to his king, deliberately showing the back of his neck. When he rises, he can see that Bill is smiling widely. He gives Harry a little nod that sends a flicker of joy through Harry that reminds him of the time Bill came to the castle to watch the third task. *He’s proud of me.*

“It was something a Wixen said, Lord Gaunt told me it when I was eleven,” Harry says.

“Seeking power, lusting for power, it is such a wixen notion,” King Ragnok muses. “Do you know, Ward, that goblins have crafts?”

“What does that mean?”

Harry sits on a log and slides his axe back into his holster. His hands are shaking.

“As Wixen have Masteries, but ours are for our lives long. More important than marriage or family, there is the craft,” King Ragnok looks over to where Griphook is coaxing Hermione to use the Potter shield. “We have all learned the art of gold and the sword in order to help our culture flourish, but we are not that only. For some, they are called to the blade as a craft, to smithing or to growing or to hearing the songs, like Griphook here.”

“Hmm.” Harry rolls both of his wrists, knowing that if he stretches out the muscles he’ll feel better later. “What’s your craft, Your Majesty?”

King Ragnok looks shocked and suddenly, old.

“No Wixen has ever asked me that before,” he says quietly.

“Oh.” Harry stops moving his wrists. “Should I not have?”

“No, Ward,” King Ragnok smiles. “You are only the first to ask. My craft is in the act of transformation. It’s why I can teach you this skill.”

“The act of transformation ...” Harry repeats. “But you don’t go around looking for wixen to teach to shapeshift, do you?”

“Conduits, Ward,” King Ragnok smirks. “Just because Wixen prefer wands crafted by Wixen hands does not mean all the world does.”

“Like rings and stuff?”

“Exactly,” King Ragnok smiles. “My point is this, Goblins know that power is not always *sought*. Wixen grab for power, just like Mordred did, they chase it down until the pursuit ruins them. Goblins know that power doesn’t need to be hungered for. It can be gifted, it can

be taught, it can be *crafted* in the community of the ancient halls beneath the earth. It does not have to make someone else weak in order to be strong.” King Ragnok gives him a sharp look. “You are not like other wixen. You do not need to be like other wixen. You do not need to compel people, to hurt and subdue them, in order to be strong. You do not need to silence them in order to speak. Remember that.”

Harry sighs and looks at Hermione and her tentative Potter shield. It seems like it’s getting much better. He hopes there will never be a time when she has to use it, but he knows that it’s a fool’s hope. War is coming and he needs to work out what tools he can use.

“I will,” Harry murmurs. “I promise.”

“Do not promise things you do not mean, Ward,” King Ragnok says sternly. “*Anzars* are creatures and people of their word.”

“I never do that,” Harry flushes and looks down at his feet. “I mean, I’ve lied before but I don’t ... I don’t make false promises.”

That’s something he can definitely say about himself at least. He might be a liar sometimes, he might be broken, and he might have done terrible things, but he doesn’t make promises he doesn’t keep. He watches Hermione’s shield get stronger. There’s a part of him that wants to always protect her, like he tried to protect Daphne, so she doesn’t ever have to use the shield.

You know better, Master, Death whispers behind him. *Others destinies are their own.*

Harry doesn’t protest. He knows it’s true, but he likes these people, he likes learning how to use his power and rather than using it to control others, he’s going to use it strengthen the people around him.

“Then you honour your *Anzar* vows,” King Ragnok smiles. For the first time, Harry sees past the amusement and curiosity to something that looks genuinely fond. “Now, Ward, go again! Let me see those wings.”

- - -

How was your day?

It was cool. I flew a bit.

That sounds promising.

Then I got stuck and fell.

That sounds hilarious.

Thanks.

I wish I had seen your wings.

Do you?

I really do.

That's information I'll bear in mind for the future, Nott.

Do so, Potter. I'll see you at the party tonight?

Yeah. Who are you taking?

Lovegood.

That's nice, she's good company.

She is strange company.

Then why did you ask her?

It is more to avoid the other Slytherins pestering me for invitations. Lovegood's father doesn't have a Wizengamot seat so she's not exactly political, but she's from a Noble and Ancient House so they can't exactly call me a blood traitor for it.

Have you had many?

Many what?

People asking you out?

Harry. Pestering someone for an opportunity to see the Weird Sisters live is not asking someone out.

Still, how many?

A few.

Fuck them.

You're not really in a position to be jealous, Harry.

Doesn't stop me.

Are you really jealous?

Sort of. I wish we could go together.

Me too. What are you going to wear tonight?

Blaise has sent me so many suits.

Have you chosen one?

Yeah. It's fine. I look weird though.

I can guarantee that you don't. I can guarantee you look so fucking handsome in it.

Well, you'll have to wait until you see it.

I am very much looking forward to it.

That's the only part to look forward to.

You never know. Maybe I'll pull you into a dark corner.

Don't tempt me.

I think I will, Potter.

Good.

Interview with a Vampire

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Harry learns why you should eat before a party.
Next time, Theo makes plans.

“Thank you for wearing the suit,” Blaise says as they approach the door for the party.

"Yeah, well, this is the one I looked least like a total knob in."

Harry turned down some of the more extravagant outfits and settled on a velvet black suit. It's clearly meant to be a nod to their fake engagement, because it has red jewels and embroidered decoration with tiny trinacrias woven into the pattern that falls in a cape-like sweep over the back of the shoulders and around the front of the collar. It's well fitted and makes Harry feel too thin so he's compromised by wearing his favourite shirt that was once Hermione's, the slightly sheer black one that balloons in all the right places, feeling comfortingly concealing whilst being posh enough for all this nonsense.

“You don't look like a knob at all," Blaise takes hold of his hand as they step into the bustling, warm room where Slughorn's dinner had been. There are live bats fluttering around the rafters and pumpkin decorations everywhere. An area has clearly been set up for a band and a house elf is playing the piano. Harry doesn't think that he's seen this many outside adults inside Hogwarts since the Triwizard Tournament. He sees a particular pair of lime green glasses in the throng and knows Rita Skeeter is here. *Fucking great.* "Also, do you own any other shoes?"

“I like these shoes, stop picking on my fucking shoes,” Harry mutters, tugging at his collar. Harry won't tell Blaise that he only has his converse and his school shoes to wear. *He'd probably buy me twenty new pairs.*

“This is going to be a night where Theo and I need to do a lot of work,” Blaise says, under his breath. He's wearing a deep, blood red velvet suit with black and silver robes over the top, embroidered with ravens. His silver raven ring is particularly prominent on his finger.

“What do I have to do?” Harry asks nervously. He looks around the room, meeting several people's curious gazes. The backs of Harry's knees start to sweat and he knows, suddenly, that this isn't going to be a fun party.

“If at all possible, my Lord, I’d prefer it if you kept out of trouble,” Blaise smirks.

“Bloody charming you are,” Harry mutters. He knows that for most of the last month, Theo and Blaise and Daphne have been Up To Something. They won’t talk about what it is but Harry gets the sense it’s some kind of Slytherin thing.

“I try, *amore*,” Blaise puts a hand on Harry’s back and guides him over to the drink’s table. In the corner of the room, Harry sees Draco. He’s wearing silver robes that Harry thinks make him look too much like his father for Harry’s comfort. He’s got Tremblay with him, who is also in silver robes, and absolutely the last person Harry wants to see,

“Fucking Tremblay,” Harry breathes, turning to the drinks table and pouring him and Blaise cups of the punch. It tastes like pumpkins and whisky. “Why the pissing *hell* is he here?”

“He is Draco’s date,” Blaise says, taking the drink from Harry and looking around the room. Despite Tremblay running his hand through Draco’s hair, Draco’s eyes are fixed on where Blaise’s hand touches Harry’s back. Harry wishes he would just look away. “And he has other reasons for being here. Eat something.”

Blaise pushes a plate of pumpkin pasties towards Harry but his grimaces and shakes his head.

"Have you eaten tonight?" Blaise presses.

"I had an apple," Harry admits. "What other reason would Tremblay be here?"

Blaise nods gently towards the couple. Harry watches as the Carrow twins in matching purple dress robes are brought over to join them, ushered by a smiling Rosier.

“Junior Death Eater meeting,” Harry shakes his head in disgust. “Lovely.”

They watch as a photographer snaps a picture of the five of them together, Rosier putting a proprietorial hand on one of the twins' shoulders. Tremblay is wrapping an arm around Draco. Harry knows what that's for. He can imagine the kind of caption that will go with that in *Witch Weekly*. *Son of Minister for Magic with prominent Heir to the House of Tremblay*.

“That’s why I need you to be a little bit dazzling tonight, my Lord,” Blaise says gravely.

"Because if the papers focus on us then they won't care about photos of Draco?"

"Of Draco and other prominent children of Death Eaters, reminding the world that Lord Gaunt has powerful allies with strong heirships," Blaise says. Harry understands the importance of it, but he can't honestly say he wants to do anything about it.

"This is my least favourite thing," Harry says honestly. "Photos and shit."

"I will try to bear the brunt of it." Blaise fiddles with his cravat pin and then looks at Harry. "Is it straight?"

“Come here.” Harry straightens it for him, noticing the small trinacria engraved in the red stone. It makes him curious. “What’s the motto for the House of Zabini?”

“*Crines Serpentium Lingua Aurea*, ” Blaise says. “Hair of serpents, tongues of gold.”

“Like Medusa,” Harry smiles. He remembers from learning Greek mythology at primary school and being particularly impressed by the gorgons. “She had serpent hair, right? Like on the trinacria?”

“Yes,” Blaise nods with a slight smile. His eyes are very orange today. “Have you been learning about mottos?”

“Yeah, the Potter one is ‘that which burns, rises.’” Harry shrugs and touches the pin gently. “I don’t know if it means anything to me.”

“You have been burned and you have risen,” Blaise shrugs effortlessly. “That’s what it means to me.”

“Yeah, well, you speak very well and you’re really pretty but you’re really fucking dangerous,” Harry counters. “That’s what yours means, right?”

Blaise throws back his head and laughs. Around the room, people look. Across the room, Harry can feel Draco scowling. Whenever Harry and Draco are in the same room, Harry feels like he can feel everything Draco does. It’s horrible. *I wish he was a million miles away.*

“Yes it does,” Blaise smiles widely at him. “Wixen have often thought the *Donas de Fuera* are beautiful, they have longed to possess us or trade us or persecute us. They have not seen beneath the beauty.”

“More fool them,” Harry grins.

“Indeed,” Blaise smirks. “We must be beautiful but dangerous tonight, my Lord, and above all, controlled.”

Harry tries not to wince at that word that reminds him so much of the terrible Hogsmeade weekend, but he remembers what the Goblin King taught him this morning. *Believe your own words, Ward.* He will not lose control.

“Fine, you be beautiful and I’ll be dangerous and *you* can be controlled,” Harry jokes.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Have a bit of faith,” Harry sips his punch and tries to ignore the way Draco’s eyes keep flicking over to him. “How’s my hair?”

“Unruly,” Blaise pulls at a piece of it and out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees Draco’s expression darken. “Here.”

He offers Harry a hair ribbon and Harry quickly tries to pull it back, his tremor making it impossible. He grimaces.

“Can you tie it for me?”

“Turn around,” Blaise smiles.

Blaise twists Harry’s shoulders and unfortunately, this means that whilst Blaise ties the top part of his hair back with a red ribbon, he has to stare at Draco and Tremblay and the rest of the room. Most people are looking at them with weird, indulgent expressions, as if watching Blaise perform this small act of friendly kindness is convincing them of the legitimacy of their relationship, more than all term of mornings eating together and holding hands. He doesn’t understand how people can go from hating and fearing him one minute to finding him interesting and entertaining the next. There’s a flash of photography bulbs and Harry winces, knowing it will be in the Daily Prophet tomorrow. He can see Rita Skeeter writing fiercely. Magnus has got some kind of wixen version of a restraining order, so she can’t come close to him, but just like Draco, Harry can feel her eyes on him. Harry’s relieved when he can turn his back on them all and twist back around to Blaise.

“How does it look?” He asks, smiling briefly over Blaise’s shoulder as Theo and Luna walk in, making a beeline towards them. Harry tries to not stare at Theo. He’s wearing a pretty simple outfit compared to the get up he wore at the Wizengamot, but those dark blue, so navy they are almost black dress robes that Harry still thinks of as Theo’s ‘pureblood prince’ dress robes always make Harry lose his train of thought.

“No,” Theo says quietly, stepping forward with Luna at his side. She’s wearing a short dress made of blue tulle and tights with glittery stars on them. Her ferret is sat around her shoulder like a scarf. “Don’t pull it back like that.”

“Why?” Blaise frowns. “He looks very suitable.”

Theo’s eyes dart towards Severus who is standing in a corner, talking to McGonagall. Harry knows what he means. With his hair tied back, he looks too much like a young Severus. Harry pulls it out.

“I’ll just have to be unruly,” Harry smirks. “Maybe I’ll get a haircut.”

“I could cut your hair, Harry,” Luna smiles, patting the head of her ferret. “I cut Opal’s.”

“Um, thanks Luna,” Harry smirks at the ferret who, now he thinks about it, does seem to have quite lopsided hair. “I’ll think about it.”

“Harry, m’boy! Heir Zabini! My prodigy!” Slughorn bustles over, his cheeks already flushed with drinking and touches Theo’s shoulder in a friendly manner. Harry tries not to frown when he sees Theo’s obvious tension but Theo politely shrugs it off, putting a hand on Luna’s arm to guide her forward.

“Professor Slughorn, may I introduce Heir Lovegood?” Theo says quietly. Slughorn barely looks at her and Harry’s stomach curdles with dislike.

“Lovely to see you here!” Slughorn thumps his hand on Blaise’s shoulder. “Now, Heir Zabini, I must borrow you, I have the Head of Iceland’s trade board as my guest and he is desperate

to meet the Contessa's son -,"

Slughorn is already walking away, expecting Blaise to follow.

"To work I go," Blaise mutters under his breath, smiling at Harry and tapping his glass.

"Don't drink too much."

"Don't flirt too much," Harry smirks back. "Unless it's politics."

"Oh, it is always politics," Blaise gives him a devilish look and disappears into the throng.

"Look, there's Hermione and Daphne," Luna says dreamily, pointing towards the grand piano. Harry smiles to see Hermione and Daphne holding hands, talking quietly. Daphne is wearing her classic Greengrass robes over a silver dress and Hermione is wearing an amazing floor length red dress that's swirling with orange and yellow and looks like it came straight out of the 60's. It definitely belongs to Magnus.

"Let's go and say hi," Harry says.

"Will you let me escort you, Heir Lovegood?" Theo says, offering Luna his arm.

"Of course, Sorcerer," Luna says sweetly. Theo's eyes meet Harry's for a moment and then dance away. There's a strange moment as they walk across the room, the three of them together. An unusual peace falls over Harry, as if something inside him knows that these are the two people he is meant to be standing with. He finds himself catching Luna's eye.

"Three together," she sighs happily. "I like it when we do this. We should do it more."

"Yeah," Harry sees a similar kind of confusion but interest in Theo's face. "Yeah, maybe we should."

"Harry," Hermione's eyes are bright and her face flushed with excitement. "Guess what?"

"Is that you look you should be at a flower power protest?" Harry smiles. "You look brilliant."

"Thanks, no, it's - it's this ..." Hermione pulls him aside, lowering her voice to a whisper, letting Daphne and Theo and Luna talk together. "Greengrass said I can call her by her first name! I mean, *Daphne* said!"

Her breath smells like punch and she's playing with her Potter ring, full of nervous energy.

"She did? Does that mean, I don't know, are you going out or something?" Harry grins. Hermione nods happily. "That's wicked!"

"She's lovely," Hermione whispers. "I know I said I didn't want another relationship but she's *so* lovely."

"She is," Harry smirks. "So will it be ... I mean, like you and Ginny?"

“No,” Hermione shakes her head determinedly. “We’re not going to court or anything, just ... be, like, going out. Not like a big public thing or anything, we only want to tell our friends.”

Harry frowns, for a moment and pulls Hermione closer, twisting their bodies so Daphne and Theo can’t read their lips.

“Mi, if this is because you’re muggleborn and she’s pureblood, if it’s because she’s trying to hide you from her family -,”

“It’s not. It’s because she hates people talking about her.”

“Yeah, well, I get that,” Harry mutters, shooting a look over towards Blaise who is being made to stand for a photo with a very boring looking person. “So you’re ... happy with it being less official?”

“Totally.” Hermione says quickly. “I didn’t want anything serious.”

“That’s good,” Harry breathes a sigh of relief. “So you’re okay?”

“I’m better than okay,” Hermione grins.

“And what about Fleur?” Harry wiggles his eyebrows.

“Oh, we’re ... we’re still writing to each other,” Hermione throws a glance towards Daphne and then looks away. “We’re just friends.”

“And ... you don’t mind? About Daphne and Blaise?” Harry breathes, trying to make sure he’s not even slightly overheard. “When we talked about it in Rome, you seemed to ... mind. About the sharing.”

Hermione shakes her head.

“Maybe if it was super serious I’d mind, like if it had been Ginny, if she’d been talking about courting and wanting to see other people I think I’d be confused but ... maybe it’s better this way,” she says wistfully. “I really like Daphne and I want to hang out with her and do romantic stuff, just casually, but it’s ... it’s still a war. She has a No Wands treaty with us but not a Bear Wands. We’re going to end up fighting and she might not.”

Harry frowns. He doesn’t like to think of Hermione fighting but he supposes she didn’t spend hours learning how to utilise the Potter shield this morning for nothing.

“Yeah,” Harry swallows. “I suppose.”

“And I really like her but it’s kind of nice to know that whatever happens between us, Blaise will be there for her, they’ll be there for each other.” Hermione goes on, looking at Daphne with a distant, thoughtful expression. “Whatever happens to me.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” Harry says firmly, even as he feels Death’s cold hand brushing against the back of his neck. *Don’t start with me today*, Harry warns her inside his mind.

Do not try to change others stars, Master. There will be imbalance.

Didn't I say not to start with me?

"Harry!" Slughorn calls loudly across the room, beckoning him over. The party basically stops to accommodate his shout. "Harry, m'boy! Come and meet my friend!"

"Shit," Harry mutters as the party goes restart their conversations. "Do you think I can just tell him to fuck off?"

"Didn't Zabini ask you to behave?" Hermione raises her eyebrows.

"Ugh, fine," Harry rolls his eyes and walks over to Slughorn and the tall, pale faced man beside him.

"Hi," he says awkwardly, seeing the way the man looks at his mutilated left hand and stuffing it into the pocket of his trousers.

"Harry, you'll not believe this I'm sure, but this is a real-life vampire!" Slughorn says. Harry sees the vampire roll his eyes. Harry wonders if Slughorn's a bit drunk. "I'm sure you have so much to ask him, I thought I'd let one half of my golden couple monopolise my special guest before everyone else."

"Oh, right," Harry stares at the vampire who only raises an eyebrow. "Cool?"

"I'll leave you to it!" Slughorn claps Harry on the back and Harry winces. "Enjoy yourself!"

"Hi," Harry awkwardly sticks out his hand to the vampire. "I'm sorry, I don't know how vampires do greetings. I'm Harry Potter-Black. Nice to meet you."

"This is fine." The vampire shakes it. His hand is cold to the touch and Harry can't help it, for some reason the Slytherin magic sparks against it. The vampire looks down at his hand with interest. "I am called Angelus."

"Cool name," Harry says. "Where do you live? You've got an American accent."

"I've spent a few decades exploring," Angelus smiles. "But as for my origins, I began in Galway but it is best to say that I've been around."

"Right, right, immortal life," Harry nods. "Where are you staying right now then?"

"I am taking advantage of the power of the Congregation," Angelus gives him a wintry smile. "The Vampire Council protects my kind. It's a rare enjoyment."

"Yeah, Blaise's Mum is awesome," Harry nods, glancing around the room.

"You're going to marry him?"

"We're promised."

"It sounds like you are not sure that you will."

"We'll see," Harry shrugs. "Hey, do you know my adopted Dad? Remus Lupin? He's on the Creature Council."

"Your adopted father sits on the Creature Council?" Angelus looks at him steadily. "What kind of Creature is he?"

"Werewolf," Harry sips his punch. It is quite strong really, and he finds words tripping off his tongue. "He *was* the Ambassador, well, *first* Magnus was the Ambassador but then Sirius tried to kill him. That was really shit. But the good thing was that Remus became the Ambassador. It was awesome, I really like Rome, but we've had some *shit* with the Minister for Magic and so now he's a counsellor because he can't go back to England. Because Lucius Malfoy is a wanker who hates Creatures."

Angelus looks at him with absolutely no expression for a while. Harry decides he might as well have another sip of punch.

"Is the Magnus you speak of Magnus Bane?" Angelus asks.

"Yeah," Harry looks at Angelus. If he's lived a long time then he probably knows Magnus. "You know each other?"

"We are acquainted."

"How long have you lived?" Harry asks. "Is it a long time? Are you really cool?"

"I was born in 1727, I was sired in 1753," Angelus says quietly. "I don't know if that makes me cool."

"Not as long as Magnus then," Harry quips. He looks Angelus over. "But I guess it does make you pretty cool."

Angelus smirks but says nothing. Harry thinks that if all conversations with vampires are this hard, he's glad he hasn't met that many.

"What name do you like?" He asks.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, I know vampires take new names when they're sired, Remus told me, but everyone has a first name," Harry shrugs, trying not to blush, but he's trying his best to at least be a bit dazzling, like Blaise asked, but he doesn't know how to dazzle a vampire. *Conversations are so stupid.* "Maybe you liked your first name best."

Angelus stares at him for a long moment and then looks into the middle distance.

"I did like my first name best," he says thoughtfully, "but now I do not want it as I did."

“Does it give you bad memories?” Harry nods, thinking of how sometimes his names don’t feel like they fit. “I get that.”

“Do you?” Angelus’ voice is soft. “You are a child of many names then.”

“You could put it like that,” Harry sighs and glances across the room to where Blaise is smiling a particular smile he has for boring people. *At least he’s having an equally difficult conversation.* “Do you like being called Angelus?”

“No.” His voice is sharp. The vampire glares across the room at Slughorn. “I don’t. But Horace wanted a certain ... perception tonight and unfortunately I owe him a favour.”

“Oh yeah, he’s the type to pull on favours,” Harry mutters darkly and is surprised when Angelus nods, approvingly. “What’s wrong with Angelus?”

“What was wrong with the name you disliked?” Angelus quips back.

Harry thinks about the first name he remembers. *Boy.*

“It was ... cruel,” Harry shakes his head, trying to dislodge the feelings of anger and rejection that rise in him when he thinks of that name. “Your turn.”

“Angelus is a name of my past, with a terrible legacy,” Angelus looks around the room with dislike. “A wixen nightmare.”

“I suppose even Wixen want something spooky for Halloween,” Harry mutters. “Which is fucking stupid, since they’re literally, like, *witches.*”

Angelus snorts into his wine appreciatively.

“So if you don’t like Angelus, what should I call you?” Harry asks.

“With some people I go by Angel,” Angelus muses. “You could call me that, I suppose.”

“Alright, Angel,” Harry shrugs. “Hey, it’s not because you have wings is it?”

“No,” Angel looks at him like he’s mad. “Do you?”

“No,” Harry scoffs, sipping his punch and hoping he doesn’t look too conspicuous. *Don’t look like you have wings.* Angel doesn’t seem to blink.

“I think it is my turn to ask some questions,” Angel says.

“Sure,” Harry glances over to where Severus is. He’s staring at Harry with a particular intensity that Harry doesn’t immediately understand.

“Your father was Sirius Black, the convict?”

“He was innocent, but yeah,” Harry winces. “Sure.”

“Your mother was ...?”

Harry remembers the story before he speaks, swallowing back her name: *Lily Potter, who died for me.*

“My other father was James Potter,” he says. “He’s dead.”

“I heard,” Angel glances around the room, as if he’s surprised by amount of people giving them curious sideways looks. “You are ... the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“That’s not a question.”

“It is not.” Angel looks back at him with an intense, dark stare that Harry finds quite intimidating really. He takes another sip of his cocktail for luck. “How is Magnus Bane known to you?”

“Mags?” Harry frowns, wondering if he actually can remember. His memory is a tiny bit blurry when it shouldn’t be. “He’s my Steward but I guess he’s like ... kind of like my big brother. Yeah. He’s my brother, we’re ... the same.”

“The same?” Angel raises an eyebrow. “So you have a creature brother and a Creature father and your late father was known for being an Obscurus, another Creature.”

“Yep, all correct,” Harry nods. Angel gives him a long look.

“I wonder what you are.”

Harry swallows heavily. He wonders if he’s given something away. He goes back over his conversation and can’t spot anything but he is getting a little bit fuzzy around the edges. He tells himself that he needs to find a good way to ask Angel what he means, a lighthearted, witty way that will make Angel give him the answers without giving Harry away, like Theo or Blaise would do.

“Why would you ask that?” Harry blurts out and then winces. *Well, Potter, that was exactly what you shouldn’t have done, you complete arse.* Angel smiles slowly as if he’s reading Harry’s thoughts and Harry starts to panic, immediately, that perhaps Angel can and looks down into his cocktail.

“You speak of immortal life, of vampirism, of lycanthropy, of daemons with ease. In my experience, most wixen are more judgemental than this, especially wixen born on these isles.” Angel takes a sip of his wine. “I have my ear to the ground. I hear what they are calling you in Rome. In the Silver Hall too.”

“People call me lots of shit,” Harry shrugs.

“I’ve been on this earth a long time. I know when someone or something is different,” Angelus looks at Harry slowly over the rim of his wine glass. “You’re different.”

“If the only reason I’m different is because I’m not a dick to people like me, then that’s a fucking low bar,” Harry says. Angel smiles slowly.

“But we are not talking of people like you, are we?” Angel says softly. “We are talking of Creatures.”

Harry sees how he slipped up there and decides to brazen it out. *Here we fucking go, Potter.*

“Everyone should get to live their life,” Harry shrugs. “Whoever they are.”

“Hmm,” Angel sips his wine. “So there is nothing remarkable about you.”

“Nope.”

"A picture, Lord Potter-Black apparent?" A photographer asks. Harry glares at him and wonders what Slughorn was thinking, inviting so many reporters.

"Which publication?" Harry asks shrewdly. He's not about to give anything to the Daily Prophet.

"*Le Charme Parisien*," he says.

"A French publication," Angel says.

"That's okay with me if it's okay with you?" Harry asks hesitantly.

"It is fine with me but you should know, it is likely they will publish a story focused on your connection to vampires."

"As long as it's not Camille, it's fine."

"Camille?"

"Magnus' vampire ex-girlfriend who I never want to meet, she's terrifying sounding. Sorry," Harry winces. "Not because she's a vampire, you know? But because I think she's genuinely a bit nasty."

"Hmm," Angel carefully stands a little closer to Harry as the photographer begins to click his camera, wildly. "I have one like that. Drusilla."

"And you think I'm remarkable, you're the ones with murderous exes." *My ex-boyfriend is just dead.*

"And you'd know nothing about what it feels like to be pursued by a murderous obsessive?" Angel says shrewdly.

"No."

"So the claims of a connection between you and the so-called Dark Lord is unfounded?"

"Obviously," Harry says. He lets his eyes drift to Theo, who looks beautiful in the glowing light of a pumpkin talking to Daphne. *So fucking beautiful.* Has his hair always had a slight reddish tone or is that just the pumpkin?

“And how is Tom Riddle?” Angel asks.

“Being a bastard, but he’s *always* a fucking bastard so what else is new?” Harry answers without thinking, rolling his eyes, but then he sees the triumph in Angel’s eyes. He gestures for the photographer to leave them alone and Harry turns slowly back to face him.

"And he claims he doesn't have a connection," Angel smirks.

“Well, shit,” Harry sighs heavily. He wonders what part of the brain is responsible for grown up conversations and why all of his friends just seem to have it whilst he’s flailing and blustering through. “Alright. Tell everyone I’m crazy, or I’m dark or depraved or all this because I was kidnapped by Tom and he’s a *wanker* -,”

“This is another way you are different, many-named-child,” Angel interrupts, his face serious. “To name the monster is rare.”

"Yeah, Dumbledore told me that," Harry mutters. "Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself. I think it's just bad manners to call people 'you-know-who' when you know their fucking name."

Angel laughs.

"You have a lot of opinions."

"Yeah," Harry shrugs. "It's not like not calling him Tom makes him less deadly."

"I once had a deadly name," Angel's eyes are dark. "The called us the Whirlwind."

"Shit name," Harry says. "Bet it didn't make you better at draining humans."

"It did not," Angel inclines his head. "I do not know if Tom Riddle believes his moniker makes him a better Dark Lord. I do not know him, but I knew his predecessor."

“Do you mean ... Grindlewald?” Harry frowns. “You make it sound like being a Dark Lord is, I dunno, like being prime minister. Like there has to be one, it’s just inevitable.”

“There has been a rising or apparent Dark Lord and a sense of evil on these islands since 1899,” Angel gives Harry a slightly bleak look. “It gives me pause to wonder who is next.”

“You think it’s me?” Harry rolls his eyes. “Big deal. Everyone thinks its me.”

“I think those who are unafraid of a Dark Lord are one of two things,” Angel says. “They are either the one to bring them down, or they are the one to follow. Sometimes they are both.”

“Yeah, that’s all dependent on me not being afraid of Tom,” Harry rolls his eyes. “Which would be stupid.”

“Is your fear going to stop you being who you truly are?” Angel asks, his dark eyes boring into Harry's. "Because I know a lot of creatures who would be interested to know."

Before Harry can answer, Severus appears at his shoulder, looking thunderous.

“Angelus,” Severus speaks in a tone that Harry associates with Very Bad Things happening. He tries not to wince. “Does Albus know you are here?”

“I imagine Horace ran it by him,” Angel looks Severus up and down. “You are?”

“A correspondent of the Watcher Council,” Severus darts his eyes towards Harry and then away. “They have protective interests here.”

It’s the first time Harry’s heard of it, all he’s heard about the Watcher Council is from Remus and that was Remus telling him that Harry would never, ever meet them, not if Severus had anything to do with it.

“No one is protected by the Watcher council,” Angel smiles tightly. “Only watched.”

“I could tell them where you are,” Severus’ voice is soft. “But there would be no reason to, would there? You are, as the Kalderash say, all bark and no bite these days.”

Harry gets the distinctive sensation that there is a conversation happening here on a different level that has nothing to do with him. He decides to finish his drink, only to lift it to his lips and be met with such a stern glare from Severus that he lowers it.

“I see you are Albus’ lapdog,” Angel gives Severus a cold look, his eyes drifting to where Severus’ dark mark is hidden under his sleeve. “Or maybe someone else’s.”

Severus says nothing. Angel holds his gaze for a long time and then looks at Harry.

“Guarded by so many,” he says quietly. “Like keepers of a bear about to be baited.”

“I can look after myself,” Harry says, he shoots Severus a deliberately dirty look, hoping to put Angel off any ideas he might have about Severus protecting him. When it comes to pretending to hate Severus, Harry has five years of experience to draw from. “Professor Dumbledore can stay out of it.”

“The Headmaster does not heed your commands, no matter how many heirships you hold,” Severus doesn’t look at him as he insults him. It seems like he hasn’t blinked, glaring at the vampire. Angel simply smiles at Severus and toasts him.

“Enjoy the evening,” he drains his glass and then moves past them. He bends down to whisper in Harry’s ear as he passes. “There are many Creatures in this world who are interested in a society where the most powerful are *not* Wixen. If you have need of me, only remember my name.”

Severus says nothing to Harry as Angel departs.

“Didn’t expect to see you here, *Professor*,” Harry sneers at Severus, letting words for behind his eyes: *Is he dangerous?*

“Your astuteness knows no bounds,” Severus sneers back. Harry takes that as a yes.

“Yeah, I’m known for my astuteness.” Harry continues to glare and lets another question form behind his eyes: *Could he be an ally?*

After all, Bill said they need more allies. Wouldn’t a hundred year old vampire be useful? Severus sips his wine and rolls his eyes, as if being caught in Harry’s company is the worse thing to happen to him.

“That remains to be seen,” he snaps. They’re getting quite good at this, Harry thinks, having snarky fights on the surface and real discussions beneath. Harry expects Severus to sweep away but he snatches Harry’s cup out of his hands and, as he brushes past him, sneers: “*O, God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!*”

“Othello,” Harry mumbles to himself, seeing the warning for what it is. *Severus doesn't want me drinking.* He realises he is actually quite dizzy. Before he can walk away, Blaise is next to him, pulling him gently onto the dance floor.

"Time to be dazzling," Blaise says. Harry groans but allows Blaise to put a hand on his waist and take his other hand. Harry puts his left hand on Blaise's shoulder. Immediately, they're surrounded by flashing lightbulbs. Harry groans and can't stop himself from lowering his head onto Blaise's shoulder. The clicking only increases.

"This is making me dizzy."

"How much have you drunk?"

"Just one! Nearly one."

"One too many," Blaise says. "When we're finished, go and get a glass of water. Drink the whole thing."

"I'm fine, Blaise, don't *mother* me, ha!" Harry snorts. "That's a joke, get it? Because you don't even call your Mum *Mum* -, "

"My Lord, we cannot afford any mistakes tonight."

As they move, Harry sees Tremblay and Draco dancing nearby, right in front of Rita Skeeter. Her eyes keep dancing eagerly between the couples, like she expects something to happen and Harry wonders, nastily, if she heard the rumours about Draco and Harry's fight. *That's the last thing we fucking need.* Harry makes a mental note to get Magnus or George to write to Draco and get him to shut up about it, just in case Severus' and Narcissa's threats aren't enough. Draco glares at him, as if he's read Harry's mind and Harry turns his face, pressing it into Blaise's black jacket and trying to drown out the cloying taste of Draco's magic with the lemony zest of Blaise's.

"I know," Harry sighs.

They sway for a while and Harry closes his eyes, trying to pretend that none of this is happening. He just breathes Blaise's magic, herbal and citrusy, and tries to pretend they're just hanging out in Rome. Not awkwardly slow dancing in front of a whole room of people

watching and taking photos. *None of this is real. What I have with Theo is real.* He feels the bond in the centre of his chest and tries not to pull on it, just to feel it, to be comforted by the sensation of it, there and real and alive and holding them together even when they can't touch or dance or kiss or look at one another. He doesn't know if it's the punch but suddenly, he's exhausted and a bit teary. Harry breathes in sharply, making sure he twists his head towards Blaise's neck so that no one will see the tears he is blinking away. Blaise stiffens slightly.

"My Lord?"

"I'm shit at all this stuff, Blaise," Harry whispers. "It's ... it's just I know you want me to be smooth like you but I'm ... I'm just shit at it. I'm sorry."

"Then it is good you have people around you who excel in it," Blaise whispers. Harry knows he's talking about Theo, who is holding a conversation with Hilary Lee right at this moment and busy doing secret Slytherin things that will help. Harry feels an overwhelming love for him then, so sharp it almost knocks the breath out of him.

"Yeah, he's - he's so good," Harry mumbles, tripping slightly over his own feet. "I - I think I need to stop."

"It's alright, we have served our purpose," Blaise holds his elbow tightly and moves him over to the drinks table. Harry leans against the table as Blaise hands him a goblet of water and picks up two glasses of punch. "Hydrate, please."

Harry nods and watches him walk back over to Theo and Hilary, gulping half of the water down. He wishes, suddenly, that he could follow Blaise and slip his arm around Theo's back, pull him close and kiss his neck. Just that spot where his pulse jumps, when he tips back his head and gasps when they're making out, that spot that makes Theo moan in a particular way, that perfect spot -

The glass in Harry's hand dissolves suddenly into fine powder and air. Harry blinks at it in amazement. *Did I do that?* It isn't the kind of explosion that happens with his anger when he explodes Severus' windows or glasses or coffee table, it's something else. It reminds Harry of the couple of times he's vanished the buttons on Theo's clothes or on his own in eagerness to get them off. Then Harry stares at his hands. The left is glowing slightly, but Harry doesn't understand why. He also doesn't understand why he's so wobbly. *Am I drunk?* That seems like it would be a bad idea. Harry stares worriedly around, but no one is looking at him. They're looking at Draco and Tremblay. He takes a shallow breath.

"Kreacher?" Harry calls softly. Kreacher pops into existence beside him, unseen under most people's legs.

"Master called?" Kreacher stares around, deliberately poking some people's calves to get more space to look up at Harry.

"Yeah, I reckon..." Harry mumbles, rubbing his forehead. "I think I need some kind of ... sobering potion? Is that a thing house elves have? Is it a wixen thing? Or do they just do coffee and irn bru like the rest of the world?"

“Master is as bad as failed Dogfather!” Kreacher pinches the back of his knee painfully.

“Ow, ow, fuck *off*, Kreacher!” Harry hisses, glancing around anxiously but no one seems to have noticed. “I can’t be drunk right now, Blaise will *murder* me and I might, like, fuck up and shit -,”

“Master will leave the party and stop talking so he does not defame the House of Black,” Kreacher snaps, shoving him towards the door. “Go! Kreacher will find him with pepper up potion.”

“Okay, okay,” Harry mumbles, slipping out of the room. He makes his way a little unsteadily down the corridor, finding a nice, cold, alcove to slip inside, sighing as he slides down the wall. He feels the magic of Hogwarts around him, the long, beautiful song of it.

“You’ve got a lovely voice,” Harry whispers, stroking the stone. Immediately, the Slytherin magic dances down his arm, meeting the stone and forming shapes.

“Hey, snakes!” Harry strokes their flickering forms, smiling widely. He presses his head back against the wall and hears the merry chimes of Hogwarts. In his fuzzy mind, it sounds like an invitation. It’s too nice to pass up, really, especially because it’s nice and cool and quiet where he’s sitting and no one’s watching. “Do you want to play?”

The song of Hogwarts is bright and eager and Harry smiles as green magic leaks out of the stone to join the green sparks trailing from his right fingertips. The magic forms the shape of snakes in the air and Harry laughs softly, feeling the Black magic building up in his blood, desperate to come out and join in. Its song is insistent at the back of his mind, a clamour of voices desperate to harmonise with the deep swell of the song of Hogwarts, travelling through the Slytherin magic.

“Alright, come on then,” Harry chuckles to himself. His head is marvellously light and he doesn’t know if it’s magic or punch. White light spirals out of his Black diamond then rises in the palm of his hand to form small, winged birds. *Ravens*, Harry thinks distantly. He watches them swoop around the snakes on the floor and then thinks to himself how much it sucks that Sahara isn’t here to play.

I’m here, Sahara whispers and suddenly, she is around his neck, sparkling green as she licks the air. *Are you playing, hatchling?*

“I think I might be,” Harry hisses softly. *“Want to join in?”*

Sahara stretches out her body from his shoulders to follow the flight of the birds made of white magic and ice. Hogwarts keens around him and he feels warmth in the stones and suddenly red magic like tongues of flame softly rises from the gaps in the stones.

“Hello,” Harry strokes his left hand against the tongues of flame and tastes a hint of tea, a distant warm song that reminds him of the Potter magic. “Sorry, they’re not with me anymore. They’re hiding, just to be annoying.”

The red magic sinks into his left hand and little tongues of flame burst out to dance on the air, like tiny stars or fireballs. The Slytherin snakes twist up their faces up to catch it, Sahara sways to and fro, and the little birds made of the Black magic flap their wings around them, chasing them. To Harry, it feels like all of the magic is waltzing to a beautiful tune in the back of his mind, a complimentary song that is somehow nothing like the individual magics but sounding like all of them. Harry laughs with the joy of it and twists his fingers. The tiny birds of the Black magic gather into one larger raven, its wings are made of ice. Harry holds out his finger and the diamond-like claws clutch it, leaving icicles. Harry looks into its dark eyes and sees the eyes of the Black Prince. He thinks of Merlin turning into a flock of ravens and feels a swell of longing.

“Hey,” he whispers. “I’ll be able to fly soon. We can fly together.”

The raven caws and flaps its wings and Harry smirks. He clicks his fingers and icicles appear around them, swooping like tiny birds around Hogwarts’ small fireballs. Harry flickers the fingers of his right hand over the snakes and drop green sparks of lightning into their mouths.

“You are joyous when you are at one with magic,” Sahara hisses.

“Who wouldn’t be?” Harry hisses back, stroking her head, lightning shivering down her skin. *“Do you think I can make them real?”*

“They are real.”

It’s true, Harry realises, looking down at the snakes as they gulp down sparks and dance with the raven and fire. This feels more real than anything else, as if his blood is truly moving and his heart is truly beating, maybe for the first time in his life.

“Magic in everything,” Harry hisses softly, stroking the raven’s head. It feels like ice and diamonds and Harry smiles. *“Everything is magic.”*

“Harry?”

He looks up, feeling a little dizzy. Theo is staring at him, eyes as wide as saucers.

“What are you doing?”

Unbreakable

Chapter Summary

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Theo deals with drunk Harry.
Next time, it's All Hallows Eve.

Theo is watching Felix Rosier out of the corner of his eye, noticing the intense conversation he is having with the Carrows and Tremblay. Draco seems to be on the edge, his smile suddenly charming, and Theo remembers that even if Draco is a little fucking shit whose tongue he would like to cut out with his own knife, Draco was still raised by Narcissa. When he wants to, he can be endlessly charming. For the Carrows, he might even be able to charm them all the way to the feet of the Dark Lord.

“They are not yours to turn,” Lovegood says as her eyes float over the Carrows.

“Do you see everyone’s destiny?” Theo asks her quietly, sipping his punch.

“Just ours,” she says dreamily and Theo stares at her. He cannot decide if that’s unsettling or not. Instead, he looks at Harry who seems to be talking to a dark-haired, pale man who looks like he could possibly be a vampire, even though Theo cannot think of a single reason why Slughorn would invite a vampire to his party.

“Theodore.” He’s distracted by Blaise appearing with Hilary Lee at his side. She looks awkward, her eyes nervously darting to where Tremblay and Draco are holding court with the Carrows.

“Can you excuse us, Lovegood?” Theo says, pressing his hand to Lovegood’s where it is tucked formally into his elbow.

“Of course,” she says, smiling softly. “You must work. Are we scheming or defending?”

Theo smiles at her. He finds Lovegood bizarre and sometimes infuriating in her obfuscation, but he cannot deny that when he is in her presence, particularly hers and Harry’s presence, he feels an unusual affection. Again, he cannot decide if it’s unsettling.

“A little of both,” he says quietly.

“Keep an eye open,” Lovegood says and she nods towards Harry.

“Thank you.” Theo watches her slide immediately onto the dance floor and begin to twirl, her ferret held high above her head, its little nose sniffing above the crowds. Theo smiles and looks at Blaise and Hilary. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve been having a fascinating conversation with Miss Lee here,” Blaise says.

“Oh?” Theo looks between them. “Are we celebrating a treaty?”

Blaise and Theo and Daphne have been having quiet, discreet conversations with Hilary Lee about her signing a treaty with Daphne or Blaise. Theo had hoped it will be concluded tonight. Hilary Lee shakes her head a tiny amount. Theo can feel Rosier’s eyes on his across the room.

“Miss Lee has some concerns about those who are sworn to Lord Gaunt,” Blaise says, still smiling with the easy countenance of a politician. “Miss Lee’s Aunt has been corresponding with me, but unfortunately, Miss Lee received a letter yesterday -,”

“Uncle Thorfin wants me to be his heir,” Hilary Lee interrupts. Theo tries not to sigh internally. They have been concerned about this, it’s why they have been trying to get a treaty finalised with Hilary Lee that predates Rowle’s offer, to give her an easy route out. Now, it is not so easy. “Sorry, I just call him Uncle because that’s how he signs his letters but I’ve never even *met* him, and now he’s telling my Auntie and Uncle I *have* to be his heir, that it’s what Dad would have wanted -,”

“Your parents were his cousins,” Theo says, trying to remember anything Apollonius told him about the Rowles. There is nothing. “How did they lean, politically?”

“I don’t know what Mum and Dad thought about You-Know-Who,” Hilary shrugs. “They both died in a train accident near St Petersburg when I was a baby. But I don’t think they’d like it very much. When they died, only my Auntie and Uncle Lee would take me.”

Theo frowns at that. It is unlike a house of the Sacred Twenty Eight not to scoop up and assimilate a wixen child left alone in the world. What happened to Harry was extremely unlikely. Hilary Lee notices his confusion.

“My Dad was a squib,” Hilary says flatly. “My Mum was muggleblorn but she loved him anyway, Uncle Fergus says. They met in London and moved to Russia. To get away.”

Theo nods. That explains why Theo has never heard of Hilary Lee’s father. It sometimes happens, of course. There is no guarantee, even in pureblood houses, that every child will be born magical. In many homes, it makes no difference, Theo is sure that parents like the Weasleys or even Remus Lupin would love a squib child as much as a magical one. However, in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, these children are hidden from Wixen society. They are often sent to private muggle boarding schools and raised, distantly, for muggle politics, aiming for positions in muggle government to work for the Wixen agenda from the other side. They are the nameless, the voiceless, the muggle, pureblooded children. No servant of the Dark Lord would ever come looking for the child of a muggleborn and a squib if he was not desperate for an heir. It seems the Dark Lord’s former care for blood purity is slipping in wake of a more urgent need: young blood.

“What can I do for you?” Theo asks her quietly.

“I wrote to my Auntie and she said I need to make a move, politically,” Hilary says nervously. Her eyes keep darting to Theo and then away and he can’t work out why. “To protect myself from Uncle Thorfin.”

“Then I recommend a no wands treaty with the House of Zabini,” Theo says, repeating what he has said all week.

“Miss Lee’s aunt has concerns about the isolationist moves the Ministry of Magic is making, particularly when it comes to the political landscape of Europe. She fears, and quite rightly, that if there is a war between our governments my influence and the Contessa’s will be less helpful to Miss Lee than we might like,” Blaise gives Theo a smug smile. “I have suggested that an alliance with a politically grey Lord in Britain might be a good notion.”

Theo stares at Blaise, unsure whether to soundly berate him for his presumption here or wait until later. They have spoken about this already, the House of Nott is not *ready* to genuinely offer treaties. Since he cannot remind Blaise of this, he settles for a steely glare, which is only returned by an even more self-satisfied grin.

“If you are looking for a politically grey lord who holds the neutral faction, I cannot recommend Lord Greengrass highly enough,” Theo says to Hilary Lee. “As I have said before, having a treaty with heir Greengrass will give you the political footing that you need.”

“Lord Greengrass is not at Hogwarts,” Blaise says sneakily. “Lord Nott will be.”

Theo glares at him but doesn’t speak.

“Excuse me,” Blaise bows to both of them. “I have a distraction to begin.”

Theo watches as Blaise walks over to Harry and tugs him onto the dance floor. Immediately, they are surrounded by photographers. Draco scowls and he and Tremblay also join the dance floor, in a bid to pull attention. Theo pulls his eyes away from Harry’s beautiful frame in his suit and the way he is resting his head on Blaise’s shoulder. Theo swallows the small twinge of agony it causes him. He knows that if he is going to get Hilary Lee a treaty tonight, it has to be now. Hilary Lee shuffles slightly, flushing.

“Your father was a Death Eater,” she whispers.

“Yes.” Theo sees no point in trying to dissemble.

“You’re ... you’re different?”

It’s the same language she used to speak to them all after their interaction with Rosier in Hogsmeade but now, with Theo, the tone could not be more different. But in Hogsmeade, Theo had been standing with Harry Potter-Black, the son of Contessa Zabini and the daughter of Lord Greengrass. It only reinforces to Theo what he already knows, what he’s been telling Blaise for the last two weeks. *I am not enough alone to redeem my House. I must work for it*

first. Without change, without Blaise and Daphne to give him credibility, people will look at him and see nothing more than the son of a Death Eater.

“I am,” Theo says evenly. He nods towards Blaise. “We have an alliance that I will honour with my life and I am Lord Greengrass’ ward. When I take my Lordship, I will continue to lean on his guidance.”

“You’re ... you’re going to be neutral?” Hilary Lee frowns as if it seems utterly implausible.

“I am neutral,” Theo lies. *I am in love with Harry Potter.* “I believe that wixen deserve more than a divided Wizengamot, governed by only two voices, Lord Gaunt and Lord Dumbledore.”

It feels strange to speak of Dumbledore in those terms, as a Lord, but that’s what he is, Theo realises. Hiding behind the term “Professor” seems to diminish him, but the man is Lord of an Ancient and Noble House, he is the Supreme Mugwump of the I.C.W and he reclaimed his position as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot when Fudge fell. Theo is struck, violently, with the power the man holds. It is no wonder, he thinks, that Harry doesn’t want to let him die yet. *We are not ready to lose an ally in those positions yet, even an ally as untrustworthy as Dumbledore.*

“But your Dad ...” Hilary Lee lowers her voice. “You’re *such* a typical Slytherin.”

Theo knows what that means. He tries not to roll his eyes at the presumption in it.

“To be Slytherin is not to be anything except all you wish to be,” Theo quotes Daphne and Hilary Lee’s eyes widen in recognition. “In that way, yes, I suppose I am typical. I wish to steer my House into grey waters so I shall. What do you wish to be, Lee?”

She stares back at him for a long moment and surprisingly, he has not felt so entirely considered and assessed since Apollonius.

“I don’t know yet,” her voice is soft. “But I know what I *don’t* wish to be. I really don’t want to be Heir Rowle.”

“I cannot ensure that,” Theo glances over her shoulder. Whilst everyone is distracted by Blaise dancing with Harry, Rosier is leaning against the piano, staring directly at Theo and Hilary. Theo keeps his expression neutral when he realises that all of this will get back to the Dark Lord. He is being watched. Theo feels a shiver but not of fear, of intense dislike. He recalls the Dark Lord’s tone of voice around Harry: *fond*. Theo is always repulsed when he remembers. If Theo ever faces the Dark Lord, he will not hesitate with his blade.

“But you swear you’ll align with Lord Greengrass?” Hilary Lee presses.

“I swear that I will guide my seat to neutral waters,” Theo amends. “I cannot swear I shall always agree with Lord Greengrass. We have differing opinions around the legislation of certain Potions ingredients, for example, but if you are concerned about the legislation of the rights of muggleborn and half-blood wixen, I will be voting that all people who carry wands should be given equal rights without impediments of heritage or blood history.”

When Theo has finished speaking, Hilary Lee is grinning at him.

“Okay,” she says happily. “I want a bear wands treaty with you.”

Theo stares at her. He was expecting a no-wands treaty.

“Why?” Theo asks.

“Because you’re smart and you have good contacts and you sound just like my Auntie. She’s a politician too.” Hilary Lee smirks.

“Oh, I’m not -,” Theo tries to say.

“My Aunt has a contract, she’ll send it.” Hilary Lee holds her hand out for Theo to shake and he takes it, feeling slightly dizzy and suddenly, victorious. “Do you have a lawyer?”

“I have an account manager.”

“I suppose that’ll do,” Lee shrugs.

“We will not announce our alliance, but you can have your account manager write to the House of Rowle and decline the offer for heirship due to competing interests. It should keep him at bay and unless he decides to come to Hogwarts, he cannot personally intimidate you.”

“What about my Aunt? Will that get her in trouble with Uncle Rowle?” Hilary Lee asks, brows frowning. “She’s a muggle, what if they hurt her?”

The benefit of his childhood, Theo realises, is he knows exactly how a Death Eater will respond to being denied a muggleborn/squib heir.

“There would be little value for him in hurting your Aunt, he does not care about muggles or muggleborns, all he cares about is your usefulness,” Theo says quietly. “You cannot be a useful heir to him now. Even if they were to try and use your Aunt to control you, it would be pointless. A bear wands treaty cannot be broken.”

“It can be, it would just hurt me,” Hilary Lee mutters.

“And therein lies the flaw in your Uncle’s plan,” Theo says simply. “He needs your compliance. You are only valuable to him if you are compliant, free to serve, and *alive*.”

Hilary Lee gives him a long, slow look.

“We’ll sign something tonight then,” Hilary Lee says quietly, glancing towards Draco, particularly. “We’ll sign it and you can send it to Gringotts so it’s official. It should be tonight. So they don’t have time to stop me.”

Theo nods, giving her an appreciative look. Hilary Lee may be the child of a squib and a Muggleborn but there is no doubt in his mind that she is the epitome of a Slytherin.

“I think that will be suitable,” he says, glancing over her shoulder and seeing Harry standing against the wall, whilst Blaise walks back towards them carrying fresh drinks as if that’s all he ever intended to do. “If you cannot find me later, give it to Heir Zabini.”

“I will,” Hilary Lee nods quickly at Blaise, taking the drink as he rejoins them. “I’ll go and sort something out now. My Aunt will still send her contract, it’s just your basic stuff, making sure that the treaty shows that I won’t be sold into slavery or anything.”

Hilary Lee bustles off and Theo turns to stare at Blaise, who has his mouth pressed into a thin line to stop from laughing.

“Sold into slavery?” Theo repeats. “Is that my reputation?”

Blaise snorts and bites his lip, hiding his laughter behind a sip of wine.

“It is done then?”

Theo nods.

“It is still a risk for her to have a treaty with me,” Theo mutters to himself, tapping his finger against his glass. “If something happens.”

“What will happen?” Blaise asks. Again, Theo doesn’t answer. *What if Dumbledore dies before we’re ready and Harry has to run?*

“Theodore,” Blaise’s voice is suddenly sharp. “I can’t shield you if you’re not honest with me. Is something coming?”

Theo wants to say that this is the worst place to have this conversation but he knows, from long experience with pureblood culture, that the best place to have a secret conversation is a quiet corner at a busy party.

“Maybe,” Theo sips his wine.

“Will it change things here?” Blaise smiles as if Theo has merely said something funny.

“Would it stop you from being a student here?”

“Not me, necessarily.”

Blaise gives him a long look and then sips his wine.

“If a Lord is forced to flee the field of battle, if he is pushed from his homeland by political machinations, what does the Consort do?” Blaise asks. “Does he run with the Lord and surrender the ground and those who took vows and treaties with them?”

Theo feels something tight clenching in the centre of his chest. He thinks of how fucking *good* it has felt to be working, practically, against Rosier since they formed *Operation Alleanza*. They’ve managed to get Alyssa Carmichael, who is distantly related to the Crouchs and might be a target for a Lordship in the Death Eaters to sign a no-wands treaty with Daphne and Theo is starting to feel it; the network of neutral Slytherins that is building

around them, cutting the Dark Lord off from manipulating newly named heirs of Death Eaters. Across the room, he sees little Selwyn dancing with Tara Ogden, another Slytherin like Viola Richmond and Goyle and little Fitz who has a treaty with Harry. Slytherins who, if Harry has to flee, will be alone without the Lord they have sworn to. Vulnerable. It's different, Theo realises, thinking about having to leave Hilary Lee, the young student who is about to swear to him, who would be left vulnerable if he has to leave Hogwarts with Harry. *Is it different or is it just more real?* After all, they may be Harry's treaties but they are Theo's housemates, determined, like him, to stay neutral and away from Death Eaters. What will it mean for Theo if, instead of following Harry, he follows the itching instinct inside him to stay and defend the people who have sworn their wands to him and Harry?

"We're not doing all this for peacetime," Blaise says quietly. "My Lord is in a politically vulnerable position, he may have to retreat at some point -,"

"Not now," Theo blurts out, feeling the panic coiling in his chest. To calm himself, he looks for Harry, still leaning against the wall. "Not today."

"You will have to make a choice," Blaise continues, his eyes full of compassion.

"And if I went with him?" Theo mutters into his glass, daring himself to put words to his innermost conflict. He can't believe they're talking about it but even as he thinks that, he hears Apollonius' harsh voice in his ears: *An unprepared warrior is a dead warrior.*

"I am your shield, I will go where you go," Blaise shrugs, his eyes flashing bright red for a second and then dulling. Theo's stomach is tight, suddenly. *It's not just me, it's Blaise too.*

"But I would be lying if I did not say I had ... concerns about leaving our flank open after all these preparations."

Theo doesn't answer. Instead, he looks for Harry, seeing him walking out of the room. Theo frowns. He wonders why Harry's leaving early, but before Theo can ask Blaise if he's okay, Slughorn is bustling over to them.

"Prodigy!" He roars, clearly deep in liquor, slinging an awkward arm around Theo's shoulder. He instantly feels the weight of the man pressing down on him and knows he is possibly not sober enough to stand alone. "And one half of my Golden Couple! What delightful, intelligent boys you both are! And Slytherins too, that was my house as you know, my lads -,"

Slughorn stumbles against Theo and Blaise shakes his head, slightly. Theo tries not to wrinkle his nose at the old man's sherry-scented breath.

"Steady there, sir."

"Thank you, Nott," Slughorn looks at him out of slightly bleary eyes. "You're just like your father, aren't you? He was a gentleman too, a favourite of mine, certainly!"

Theo looks around the room and notices that Draco seems to be trying to slip away from Tremblay, his eyes following where Harry has walked out of the room. *Oh no, you don't.* He remembers what Luna suggested earlier: *keep an eye.*

“Excuse me,” Theo ducks out from under Slughorn’s arm, gesturing for Blaise to take his place. “Lavatory.”

As Theo steps towards the door, someone steps into his path. Rosier is wearing black robes, edges with dark, almost blood-coloured rosy pink edges, the colours of his house and a polite smile.

“I see you are enjoying the company of Miss Lee,” Rosier says softly.

“I am enjoying everyone’s company, it is a party,” Theo says blandly. “Excuse me.”

“ *C’est bon*, ” Rosier says. “Forgive me, Theodore, before you go ...”

“Yes, Felix?” Theo prompts, not for a second believing that Rosier’s politeness isn’t a veil for something else. *If he can drop my first name without asking for permission, so can I.*

“A short message,” Rosier steps closer, dropping his voice and speaking regretfully. “Minister Malfoy sends a warning.”

“Through you?” Theo raises an eyebrow. He can see that Draco’s been trapped in a very involved kiss with Tremblay so gives Rosier his attention. “I wasn’t aware you were in the employ of the Ministry of Magic, Felix, or are you preparing for an internship next year?”

Rosier only smiles. They both know in what capacity Lucius Malfoy can command young Felix Rosier; as one Death Eater at the top of the pile to one Death Eater at the bottom of it.

“The Minister says I should warn you that your behaviour has been noted,” Rosier says softly. “They watch you, Theodore. You have great potential.”

“I am flattered,” Theo says flatly. “That is all?”

He knows it isn’t.

“Not quite. The Minister asks me to remind you that if you do not begin to fall in line according to the rank of your house, the next time the warning will not come from me,” Rosier smiles insincerely.

“Well,” Theo says slowly. “I appreciate your gentility in passing on such a message. I will not trouble you with a response.”

Rosier’s eyes are cold but Theo knows he understands. Theo will not be falling into line according to his house. Not tonight and not ever.

“ *Bonne soirée*, Theodore,” Rosier says, nodding his head in a classic display of pureblood breeding. Theo will not nod back.

“*Au revoir*, Felix ” Theo says, neatly sidestepping his childhood acquaintance. His mind is churning out the possibilities as he moves out of the door. He doubts such a threat has come from the Dark Lord himself, having seen the way the Dark Lord sends threats to Harry he imagines the experience would be much less subtle. Lucius Malfoy, however, Theo can see

sending exactly this type of message, trying to corral the heirs at Hogwarts in order to please his Lord. Theo almost snorts with distaste at the grandiose scrabbling of it all, Malfoy's continued persistent efforts to keep himself at the top of the pile. There is so little dignity in it that Theo is mildly disgusted. *Being a Death Eater has never seemed less appealing.*

"You are acquainted with Heir Rosier." Theo turns to see Professor Snape standing beside him, holding both a glass of wine and a half-empty cup of punch.

"I am," Theo nods. "As if I needed more indictment not to follow Lord Gaunt."

Snape gives him a steady look that Theo thinks might be the equivalent of the dour Potions Professor smirking. Theo knows that Snape *can* smile, he has seen him, on occasion, smile when he looks at Harry when they were all living together at Spinner's End, but he's never seen Snape smile for anyone else. Theo supposes he might smile for Remus Lupin, but maybe Lupin doesn't need his lover to smile.

"This punch is nearly made nearly entirely of spirit alcohol." Snape lifts the punch to his nose and sniffs it distastefully. "It is utterly unsuitable for children. Especially underweight children."

Theo knows exactly who Snape is talking about. He looks towards the door, wanting to go after Harry but needing a reason for his absence, especially now Rosier has told him how explicitly he is being watched.

"I believe I have a Potion I would like you to watch downstairs," Snape says lightly, sipping his glass of wine. "If you would be so kind."

"Yes, sir," Theo says, knowing Snape will cover for him if anyone, particularly Slughorn, wonders where he is.

"Go," Snape jerks his head, and in that small action, Theo sees how much Snape wishes he could be the one going to find Harry. *He's worried.* Realising that spurs Theo out into the corridor outside the party, thinking about where Harry would go. If he's feeling drunk (which is incredibly likely, as Harry hasn't gained enough weight to healthily metabolise alcohol and Theo knows he's a lightweight anyway) he will probably somewhere he could sit down or to a bathroom to vomit. Theo sets off in the direction of the nearest alcove. As he approaches, he hears hissing and smiles knowingly. Then he sees sparks and frowns. He speeds up and peers into the alcove. Then he stares.

"Harry?" Theo doesn't expect his voice to be so croaky. "What are you doing?"

He doesn't know why he asked. Harry is clearly doing magic. But it is unlike magic Theo has ever seen and given that he's been with Harry for over a year now, that's saying something. Harry's hair is slightly static, full of magic, one arm looks like it is slowly freezing and the other looks like it is turning into lightning. There's magic that seems to be leaking out of the stone in green light and red flame, tangling around Harry's limbs and flowing in some kind of amazing dance with the magic coming out of his hands and rings and a plethora of animals made from magic, hissing and flying around him. This would all be extraordinary on its own, but it's *Harry* that's made Theo feel as if he's forgotten every word he's ever learned. Harry

looks happy. He looks relaxed, he looks free and confident, and whilst Theo has seen Harry wield magic many times and been overwhelmed by how powerful he looks, it's nothing compared to this. This is something better than power. This is joy. To see how much delight it gives Harry, how his eyes glow with an almost golden gleam and his hands barely tremble. There's something entirely otherworldly about Harry at this moment, seeming to be made of ice and lightning. He doesn't look like a powerful wixen, he doesn't look like a wixen at all. *He's a creature*, Theo realises dazedly, the fact of it hitting him squarely in the chest. The word isn't just something Harry prefers, it's the truth.

He's not a wixen, he's a Mage. He's a creature and I'm in love with him.

"Hey," Harry grins goofily up at him, and Theo wonders if he's tipsy on magic as well as punch. "We're playing with Hogwarts! Wanna play with us?"

Theo breaks into a slow grin, feeling as if his heart is expanding. It is too adorable, looking at Harry in his fancy beautiful suit and his scruffy trainers, sitting on the floor with Sahara around his neck and all the magic all around him. It is too endearing for Theo to be mad at.

"Harry," Theo smiles, crouching down in front of him and trying to control his smile. "Are you a bit drunk?"

"Who knows?" Harry sighs happily, tiny ravens filled with ice circle around his head. "Yeah, maybe. Does dizzy feel drunk?"

"Yeah, it does," Theo reaches out and strokes Harry's cheek. Tiny sparks erupt into Theo's fingertips.

"Hmm," Harry scrunches his face up. "Yup. Then, yeah, I reckon I'm a bit drunk. S'ok though. Kreacher's bringing me a potion."

"That's a good idea," Theo smirks. Harry shuffles over and pats the space of floor beside him. Theo shakes his head. "No, Harry, we can't, we'll be seen."

"Shhh, it's fine," Harry grabs Theo's arm and pulls him down beside him. Then Harry beckons to the icy ravens and they cluster over his icy fingers like hundreds of jewels. Harry bends his lips to them, a low whisper misting on his breath: "Hello! Can we have a shield, please? We'd like to be unseen. Oh! And unheard."

Theo shakes his head, amused and baffled, as the birds of ice take flight and spread their wings wide, causing ice to splinter over the alcove as if they are freezing an invisible window, encasing Harry and Theo inside.

"Secret," Harry sighs happily, flopping his head back against the wall. Theo sees the odd, cushion of flames crowning him like a halo. Sahara hisses her way off Harry's shoulder and down onto Theo's arm. She's so bright, her scales vivid green, just like Harry's eyes, and she is incredibly warm.

"Did you leave the party because you were drunk?" Theo asks. He doesn't think it would be wise to touch Harry's hands right now. One looks like it is deeply frosted, almost as if his

bones might be turning to icebergs and the other keeps flickering with lightning, illuminating the bones beneath like a muggle x-ray machine. Theo simply strokes his knee in the black velvet trousers.

“Yep,” Harry huffs, shooting tiny lightning bolts down into the mouths of the green snakes made of magic. They gobble them up. “Didn’t want to fuck up things for you and Blaise and your polo - politic - polololiticks -,”

“Politics,” Theo smirks.

“Yeah,” Harry nods happily. “Met an Angel though! His name was Vampire.”

“Is that so?” Theo smirks. “You sure it wasn’t the other way around?”

“Hmm, yeah, I think it might have been, yeah,” Harry bites his lip, his brows furrowed in enchanting concentration. “He thinks I’m strange but I think *everyone else* is strange, isn’t everyone else strange?” Harry swivels his livid green eyes to fix on Theo. “Isn’t it weird that other people don’t hear the songs? And they don’t have this?”

Harry presses his hand full of lightning against Theo’s sternum. Theo gasps. He thought it might be like an electric shock but it isn’t. It’s like nothing Theo’s ever felt. If he had to describe it, he would think it’s how it would feel to have liquid sunshine, raw and deadly and joyous, pouring into his heart. All around them, the blue and gold of the fidelity bond ignites, but it’s different. It quickly transforms into golden birds, their wings sparkling and gilded, their eyes blue stones, exactly like Theo’s heir ring. They float around them on currents of blue magic that look like waves.

“This,” Harry mutters, nuzzling his nose and lips against Theo’s cheeks. They are full of sparks and Theo thinks he might have forgotten how to breathe. It’s not just desire, Theo understands desire and he’s familiar with its peaks and valleys. This is different. Oddly, it reminds Theo of the very first time his mother took him out at night to see a unicorn when he was still a child. The awe and the wonder and at the same time, unbelievable safety. The wonderful knowledge that something so magical would never hurt him. “How do people survive without this, Theo? Feeling so safe and - and connected and -,”

“I don’t know,” Theo croaks out. Theo instantly thinks of his conversation with Blaise and feels guilt settle in his stomach. *How can I even be thinking about being separated from this? Separating him from this?*

“How do they live without this feeling?” Harry hisses and Theo shudders because Harry is so full of magic right now, that the parseltongue feels less like it is dropping into Theo’s mind and more like soaring through his blood, directly through Harry’s hand on his heart. *If I don’t kiss him I’m going to die, but he’s very drunk right now -*

“Harry,” Theo places his hands on Harry’s shoulders, not sure if he wants to pull him close or hold him away. “You’re drunk.”

“Yeah,” Harry huffs with laughter and drops his forehead against Theo’s shoulder and his hand from Theo’s chest. The intensity of the moment lessens and Theo feels less like he’s

being compressed by desire. He takes a steadying breath. "Are you fitter? Did you - did you get fitter? Or am I just really stupid and I didn't notice?"

"I think that's the punch," Theo smiles ruefully, watching in amazement as the gold birds twirl around them. "You shouldn't drink mixed spirits, beloved."

"Nope, nope, not the booze, you're just *fucking brilliant*," Harry rubs his nose against Theo's robes. "I love these robes, they're the best."

"You do?"

Theo's always suspected from the way Harry's eyes fix on him, slightly wide with astonishment whenever he wears them. It's exactly the same way that Harry used to look at him when they were in the Scout hut; like he was a surprise and a miracle all at once.

"Yeah," Harry mumbles into his robes. "They're your pureblood prince robes, you look *delicious* in them -,"

"Oh do I?" Theo grins. Drunk Harry might be a little bit magically astonishing but it's also pretty fun.

"Yep," Harry sighs. "There's no one like you, no one smells like you, no one tastes like you -,"

Harry surges up and kisses him. There's magic on his tongue. Theo thinks if anyone is delicious, it's the teenage Mage who is currently unconsciously directing magical snakes to bind their hands together.

"Right now I taste like terrible Halloween punch," Theo mutters, deliberately pulling away because it's too good and Harry is drunk and Theo must be the sensible one.

"No, your *magic* tastes delicious," Harry says earnestly, licking his lips. "You taste *perfect*, you always have, like treacle and thunderstorms and the best things ever."

Theo smiles slowly, his heart starting to race. It's been nearly a year, almost exactly, since Theo first asked Harry in the Forbidden Forest what his magic tasted like. Theo remembers that day, how Harry had pushed him against a tree and yelled at him not to choose him. Theo remembers how much he had wanted to kiss Harry then, as he had cupped his face and commanded him to tell him what he could smell and taste in an attempt to calm him down. He had nearly done it. Maybe he would have if Harry had told him then and there that he tasted like treacle and thunderstorms. *Only Harry would know what a thunderstorm tastes like.*

"You've never told me that," Theo brushes a curl out of Harry's face, a feather of golden magic pulling away with it and then vanishing into the air between them. "I love you."

Harry smiles dopily, still swaying slightly.

"I love you too," he sighs, pressing his face back down against Theo's shoulder. Theo marvels, just for a second, at how easy it has always been to touch Harry and be touched by

him. Even before their fidelity bond, even when Harry turned up in the Scout hut with his different face and Theo thought he was an imposter, Theo still let Harry touch him when he pushed his wand into Theo's chest. Theo still took his hand to show him his new face in the mirror. *Why has it always been so easy with him?*

"Hey, does this count as being pulled into a dark corner?"

"Well, you pulled me, Harry."

"Ha!" Harry snorts with laughter. "I pulled you!"

"Excuse me?"

"That's what muggles say," Harry chuckles. "Like, when you pull a bird."

"And do what with it?" Theo says blankly, but that only sends Harry into fits of giggles.

"A bird is a *girl*, Theo," Harry grins sappily up at him. "Like, if muggles go out and they meet someone and, like, shag them, they've *pulled* them!"

"That is a complete abuse of the English language," Theo blushes, but Harry has collapsed into giggles again. Suddenly, Theo hears voices on the other side of the shield. Two voices he recognises.

"Shh," Theo puts a hand over Harry's mouth. Harry shoots him a playful look and nips Theo's palm. *I will not find that sexy*. Theo squeezes his knee in a warning. "Listen."

Harry tips his head curiously towards the shield. The raven made of the Black magic cocks its head as well.

"What are you doing out here?"

That is definitely Snape's low, insistent tone. Harry's dark eyebrows furrow.

"I thought I saw Potter -,"

That is certainly none other than Draco Malfoy. Harry groans against Theo's palm in irritation.

"What did I tell you? Was I not utterly explicit?"

"I'm allowed to walk around the bloody castle!"

"You cannot be seen stalking the Lord Black-Apparent around the castle, especially after Hogsmeade -,"

Theo looks at Harry who winces, just as he does whenever anyone mentions that weekend.

"I know! But I have a job to do as well -,"

“Then you must do it with considerable more tact! You are already suspected of having a hand in the Hogsmeade debacle.”

"Who suspects me?"

“You know who does.”

Harry’s eyes have taken on a particular sharpness that Theo associates with Harry gathering secrets. They still don’t know who was the intended target for the opal necklace.

“So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!”

“Do not be childish.” Theo hears the paint-stripping tone of Snape’s voice, a tone that has made countless Slytherins quake. “I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —”

Theo sucks in a breath and looks down at Harry, who seems completely nonplussed. Theo doesn’t know if he’s too drunk to be paying proper attention or if he genuinely doesn’t know what an Unbreakable vow is.

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection!" Draco’s voice is full of bitterness but also, characteristically, arrogance. “It’s my job, he gave it to me and I’m doing it, I’ve got a plan and it’s going to work, it’s just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!”

“Heavy is the head, Draco. If you do not believe me, ask your father.”

“Because he sucks Voldemort,” Harry mumbles.

“Shhh.” Theo keeps his hand over Harry’s mouth until the first, rapid set of footsteps have disappeared and then a slower more even-paced set. Then he slowly lowers it.

“Why did you do that?” Harry taps the shield with his icy hand. Theo’s a little disconcerted when it sounds like glass. “Unseen *and* unheard.”

Before Theo can answer, there’s a pop and Kreacher appears, scowling at them both.

“Why has Master made more magic snakes and magic birds?” He bats them away with his little hand and forces a potion bottle against Harry’s chest. “Master must drink and not be a drunkard like the failed dog father.”

“Stop saying that,” Harry glares at him and knocks back the potion with a shudder. “Why were you so worried about being overheard?”

“Did you hear what they were talking about?”

“Um, yeah, sort of,” Harry grimaces and shakes his head. “It’s all a bit fuzzy.”

“Master must call back snakes!” Kreacher snarls. He’s backed into a corner with green snakes made of lightning twisting around his ankles.

“Chicken.” Harry rolls his eyes and hisses at them at the same time as raising his left hand and making a beckoning motion. Suddenly, the birds and snakes have gone and Harry’s arms both look normal. Theo quickly takes hold of them, testing them. The left is chilled but no longer nearly solid with ice. The right is warm but no longer full of bursting lightning. He looks into Harry’s eyes and the gold has diminished. Harry is sober again and a familiar veil of worry has fallen over his eyes. Theo feels slightly mournful about it.

“Snape said he did an Unbreakable Vow,” Theo rubs Harry’s cold, left hand. The Black diamond is still glowing. Kreacher emits a low hiss at his words.

“Unbreakable vows are tricky magic,” Kreacher shakes his ears.

“God, that potion tasted awful,” Harry sticks out his tongue.

“Harry? Did you hear what we said? About the Unbreakable Vow?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So it’s an Unbreakable Vow, it’s a big deal.”

“Why?” Harry frowns.

“Because if you break an unbreakable vow you die.”

“So? All of our vows are kinda deadly, right?” Harry shrugs. “We die if we break the fidelity bond, I can’t imagine anything good will happen to Blaise if he breaks his shield vow -,”

“Yes, alright.” Theo realises this is the problem. Harry is surrounded by too many extraordinary bonds to find an Unbreakable vow noteworthy. “That’s not the point. The point is, Snape swore on his *life* he would protect Draco.”

“Well, he’s his godfather, right? That’s inevitable,” Harry is rubbing his forehead and looking like he wishes it wasn’t. “It doesn’t change the fact Severus would die for me too.”

“That isn’t loyalty.” For some reason, Theo can’t stop thinking about Apollonius, sending him to live with his aunt. “Apollonius would have died for me but he was not loyal to me first.”

He was loyal to the Dark Lord.

“So you’re asking who he’s more loyal to?” Harry raises his eyebrows. “Draco or me?”

“Yes.”

Harry seems to collapse slightly, rubbing his forehead.

“I dunno,” he mutters darkly.

“Draco has been given a specific task by the Dark Lord,” Theo’s mind is running fast through the different possibilities.

“Yeah, to hurt someone,” Harry sighs.

“But who?” Theo thinks aloud. “He cannot imagine he will be successful. Draco is hardly covert.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want him to be successful so he can punish him,” Harry shrugs. Theo thinks that’s pretty insightful for someone who, not five minutes ago, was very drunk. “Or kill him.”

“If Snape has taken the Unbreakable Vow, Draco’s death will be Snape’s own death.”

“Then Severus won’t let that happen,” Harry looks disgruntled by the notion. Then he takes a deep breath. “I don’t know, Theo. Can we go to bed?”

“Yeah.” Theo gets up. He can tell Harry doesn’t want to think about it anymore. “I’ll go and get my books from the dorm and get Kreacher to pop me through?”

Harry nods. Theo hesitates but then carefully steps through the Black shield. It feels like a cold shower. When he turns back, he can see nothing but an empty alcove but he can feel Harry, sense him through the bond, a warm sun in the centre of his chest. *Interesting*. Theo walks away, considering the implications of it, and composing a letter in his head.

Later, when Theo is lying in his bed with Harry asleep on his chest (the pepper up potion hasn’t been enough and Harry’s dozed off, complaining of a headache that Theo knows is the beginning of a hangover) Theo signs a hastily drawn up personal contract between himself and Hilary Lee that Blaise has left in his notebook.

“Kreacher,” he whispers. The elf appears and immediately scowls, poking Harry’s head.

“Master must sleep it off,” Kreacher mutters. “Good. Master is a fool.”

“It’s his first time properly drinking, Kreacher, and he’s on potions too, give him a break,” Theo says.

“Kreacher shall not!” Kreacher snarls. “Kreacher shall *never* let Master turn into drunkard failed dogfather.”

“I think he’s still quite a way away from being a chronic alcoholic, it was one drink.”

“That is how it begins,” Kreacher shakes his head.

“Can you please take this through to Gringotts?” Theo hands Kreacher the contract. “It’s important it goes to my account manager, Ironfang, immediately.”

“Kreacher can take the treaty.” Kreacher snatches it. “For a fee.”

Theo sighs and reaches over to Harry’s bedside table, pulling out a curly wurly and tossing it to Kreacher.

“Ridiculous,” Theo shakes his head. “You cannot possibly be eating it all.”

“Kreacher is not the only elf who likes delicious muggle treats,” Kreacher says, with a sly grin.

“Wait, are you running a racket?” Theo stares at him. Kreacher laughs wildly and then pops away. Theo wonders for a second how much money Kreacher is making off redistributing sweets to the house elf population of Hogwarts and *Castello de Creature* in Venice. Then, he pulls out his latest letter from Narcissa which is marking a section in *Stories of Great Wixen* that Narcissa loaned him over the summer. He turns the page of the book, reading on from where he left off earlier that day:

Paracelsus, credited with discovering Parseltongue, maintained that Morgana Le Fey was a serpent speaker and in his own account of her life, ‘Morgan of the Serpent Tongue,’ from 1543, he declared:

“As Merlin made weavings of magic as had never before been seen or known, Morgana spun magic on the field of battle against Uther Pendragon to make her a leader to her people, the Sorcerer. She faced Uther Pendragon in Camelot, and brought the truth of her people to the throne to scold and censure him when Merlin was banished from the holy city. It is said she spoke to him over long distances, as his familiar did. If Merlin was the wand that brought justice in the land with magic unparalleled, Morgana was the hand that held and steered it.”

Theo carefully underlines the last sentence and then, his mind full of ponderous thoughts, refers back to Narcissa’s letter which he is in the middle of translating from Ancient Greek. He carefully writes the translation underneath her words in disappearing ink, trusting they will vanish in an hour or so. Narcissa’s thoughts on the chapter they have been discussing recently emerge:

If accounts of legend are to be believed, Morgana protected her people with her skills both on and off the field of battle. Your path will be your own, Gwion, I do not see it clearly. But I would not be a sensible guardian and guide if I did not advise you on this: when it comes to protecting your people, use all of your skills.

Theo sighs heavily and looks at the words, letting them settle. *What skills do I need to be the Sorcerer?*

“Mmm,” Harry rolls and rubs his face against Theo’s bare chest. “No.”

“No what?” Theo mutters, kissing his tousled hair.

“Don’t need you ... be anything else,” Harry sighs. “Just am.”

“What?”

Harry huffs in adorable, sleepy frustration and then hisses, his parseltongue falling into Theo’s brain even though Harry isn’t awake to force it - just the magic of him pushing it through.

“ You are the Sorcerer. I am the Mage. Nothing else is needed.”

Theo takes in a sharp breath. When Harry speaks parseltongue in his sleep, sometimes it doesn’t even sound like Harry. Theo can’t help but wonder if the words are pulled out of that deep place inside Harry where he says that magic sings.

“I love you,” Theo whispers, brushing his hair gently. “Sleep.”

“Hmm,” Harry sighs happily. “Just be you, *my grey one.*”

Theo smirks. It’s always so endearing when Harry is so sleepy that he slips in and out of parseltongue mid-sentence.

“ Mine, ” Theo hisses crudely back and Harry smiles to himself. Theo brushes his thumb against Harry’s scar, always red, always looking like it’s on the edge of bleeding. It does feel a lot harder when Harry’s not conscious and aware but Theo concentrates on pushing thoughts through the bond.

I will be the hand that guards your power, if I can.

Harry presses his nose and cheeks against Theo’s neck. Theo thinks, for a moment, Harry hasn’t heard him or he is too asleep to listen, but then strange words float back:

I will be the power that holds your hand, if I can.

Theo smiles to himself and looks back over the passage he has written. He underlines the words: *It is said she spoke to him over long distances, as his familiar did.* Then he begins to write a letter to Magnus Bane.

— — —

Dear Magnus,

You know more about my bonded and the bond between us than anyone else alive. Tell me, is it possible to stretch a bond such as ours? In the past, he has sent me feelings or emotions when they have been intense, sometimes over great distances. How do I go about learning how to send them back to him?

Yours faithfully,

Theodore Nott

Dear Theodore,

These are conversations best had in person. However, I would think that in the meantime, the answer lies in practice for you and in deliberate concentration for him. As you know, he has much power but little awareness. You have less power and much awareness. You have skills you can teach one another.

I do wonder what circumstance you anticipate when you shall be far apart from one another and why you anticipate it now.

Your servant, always,

Magnus Bane

Dear Magnus,

Because an unprepared warrior is a dead warrior.

Yours faithfully,

Theodore Nott

All Hallows Eve

Chapter Notes

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags. Here be cliffhangers. If you have a fear of heights, if you dislike the hang over potential doom that constitutes literary abseiling, wait until it is finished to read. You have been warned.

This time, Harry learns the importance of remembrance.
Next time, Theo and Harry have a plan.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry dreams.

He sees the burning points and the single smoking one and feels Death stands behind him.

"It's your anniversary." Harry looks at Sirius. He looks like he did beyond the veil. Healthy. Alive.

"Is it?" Harry looks down at the single smoking point. "How come you're here?"

"The veil is thin," Death says, her cold hand on Harry's head, carding through his hair.

"Exactly," Sirius steps closer and smiles. "It's why I'm here."

"Okay," Harry smiles at him. He smells like smoke and his tattooed fingers stroke Harry's Black diamond. "How's James?"

"He's grand, Harry." Sirius' smile is dazzling. His true smile, which Harry never saw until the other side of the veil. "Your Mum says hi."

"She does?"

"It's All Hallows Eve." Sirius gives him such a tender look, Harry feels it all the way to his toes. "The veil is thin. Messages will be heard."

"Okay." Harry looks into Sirius' starry eyes. "Tell James, thank you for loving me even though I wasn't his."

"You were his," Sirius says simply. "You are his. You were mine. You are mine. You were and are hers and you are theirs and will be theirs for a long time, I hope."

Harry doesn't ask who they are.

"I belong to a lot of people then."

"All the best people do," Sirius chuckles. "Don't be afraid of that, pup. Your bonds are your greatest strength."

"Do you know who I am?" Harry asks Sirius, as he wraps his strong arms around Harry.

"Course I do," Sirius breathes. "Do you?"

"I thought I did. But when I'm here ... I'm not sure." Harry looks at Death out of the corner of his eyes. "You do."

"I do." Death gives him a fond smile. "But all things in their time, Master."

Harry wakes on Sunday morning, All Hallows Eve, and thinks one thing: *Mum*.

He kisses Theo's shoulder before Kreacher pops Theo sleepily back to the Slytherin dormitory and thinks another thing: *James*.

He steps under the water in the shower and lets it fall on his face and thinks: *Godric's Hollow*.

He pulls on his silver robes and silver tie and thinks: *Sirius*.

He walks down the steps into the Gryffindor common room and thinks: *Cedric*.

Something weird is happening this morning. For some reason, seeing him with Blaise at last night's party has given him a slightly different reputation in the castle. Harry doesn't fully notice it (after all, his head is still pounding from last night) until he and Ron are walking down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"Alright, Harry?" Ernie MacMillan says when he passes them with Justin Finch Fletchley. "You look well. Happy Halloween."

Justin, who has not spoken to Harry since Cedric died, actually nods at him and mutters: "Happy Halloween."

Harry nearly falls over himself.

"What in the pissing hell is happening?" He mutters to Ron. "Am I still drunk?"

"I don't know, mate." Ron looks as confused as him, especially when Parvati Patil walks past them as they sit down at the Gryffindor table and squeezes his *shoulder*.

"Happy Halloween, Harry," she says, with a weird, kind of sappy smile.

"What the fuck?" Harry whispers. Ron stares at her in amazement.

“What did you *do* at that party last night?” he whispers back.

“I don’t know!” Harry gets a swell of terror in his gut. *Christ on a broom, what did I do?* He’s relieved when Blaise sits down next to him.

“Do you know what’s got into everyone?” He asks desperately.

“Well, Professor Slughorn did a rather loud and drunken toast to the Potters at midnight last night and proclaimed at length what a *brave* hero you were,” Blaise says, helping himself to coffee and pouring some for Harry who sucks it down eagerly. “People saw you leave early. I think they assumed you were overcome with grief.”

“What?” Harry nearly spits out his coffee. He stares at Hermione as she sits down across from him but she shrugs helplessly.

“I don’t know, we left early,” she whispers, blushing as her eyes dart to Daphne at the Slytherin table. “To go for ... a walk.”

“So if I have to guess, I think everyone’s usual vitriol has been diverted by sympathy,” Blaise butters some toast. “Enjoy it while it lasts. For surely, tomorrow, they will have all forgotten and hate you just the same.”

“I’m meant to enjoy this?” Harry stares around the room angrily. “I’d rather they were calling me a Dark Lord.”

“You’re a Dark Lord, there you go,” Ron says easily, passing Harry an apple.

“Don’t encourage him!” Hermione slaps the back of Ron’s head.

“There’s no pleasing you,” Blaise chuckles, smirking at Harry. “You don’t want people saying you’re evil, you don’t want people saying you’re sympathetic -,”

“I don’t want people talking about me at all,” Harry says emphatically. *Least of all about this.*

“Happy Halloween, Harry!” Romilda Vane calls as she walks past him. Blaise gives her a charming smile and holds Harry’s hand on the table.

“Happy Halloween, Vane,” he says pleasantly and Romilda Vane scowls darkly as she walks away.

“What kind of people say Happy Halloween on the anniversary of my parents’ deaths?” Harry mutters under his breath. “What, am I meant to have a happy day?”

“Ignorant,” Hermione glares at Vane’s back. She reaches across the table and touches Harry’s fourth finger, where his Potter ring should sit. Harry thinks she looks sadder today than she has at any other Halloween they’ve had over the years.

“You okay?” He asks her.

“Yeah,” Hermione’s eyes fill with tears and she sniffs, looking down at her Potter ring. “I just ... the ring it ... I don’t know, I just feel like I *miss* her. I miss Lily.”

Harry’s heart clenches. It’s weird to hear it, but it’s what he needs. He needs to know someone else is missing her and not thinking about the extra large pumpkins Hagrid’s grown or how drunk everyone got at Slughorn’s party last night.

“Yeah,” Harry looks down at Blaise’s hand. Oddly, Blaise has intertwined his fingers with Harry’s, which he *never* does and is looking at him with a distinct, comforting expression. “What?”

“Samhain is an important time to remember and honour the dead,” Blaise says quietly. “In my country, we celebrate with bonfires and divination and rituals, some going back to Parentalia in the time of Ovid. It is appropriate to remember the man who sired you and the woman who raised you from infancy.”

Harry feels comforted. Even if Blaise doesn’t know the truth about his Mum, Blaise knows she meant enough to Harry for him to swear his vow on her name.

“So not all wixen just do this?” Harry looks distastefully around the hall. “Put up pumpkins and wish the poor orphan a happy Halloween, like that makes up for it?”

“Hogwarts is a school that was long ago stripped of any semblance of spirituality,” Blaise smiles as he looks at the giant pumpkins and enchanted silver spiders in their webs. “At one time in history, Hogwarts was the centre of Samhain on the British isles.”

“Yeah, back when students came to learn from the founders themselves,” Harry says. Hermione’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Did you read *Hogwarts, a History*?”

“Why would he need to, with you around?” Ron snorts. “You know, before I came to school, we had a Samhain bonfire. Mum still does it, with everyone who lives around us. The Ollivanders, the Lovegoods, the Diggorys ...”

Ron’s words fall away.

“What do you do with the bonfire?” Harry asks.

“It’s, like, a memory ritual thing, it’s not important,” Ron says gruffly and Harry knows why. Instantly, he thinks of Amos Diggory, saying some kind of prayer or something for his son and winces. Taking a heavy breath, he stands up.

“Gotta go,” he tries to keep his voice light. “Meeting with Dumbledore.”

He walks out of the great hall and thinks: *Arthur*.

He climbs the secret staircase to Dumbledore’s office, thinks of Sahara and lets her wrap herself, green and glowing around his neck.

Your heart is heavy with mourning, Greenheart.

Today is the day we do that, Harry thinks.

He watches Dumbledore's memories of Voldemort's old employer and the sad old lady with the devoted house elf. He listens to Dumbledore's theories and nods, obviously, the house elf didn't do it. He watches a memory of Morfin Gaunt and Tom hissing at one another in parseltongue and agrees because obviously, Tom killed his grandparents. *Just like he killed my Mum.* He watches another memory about Slughorn and sees the same greediness in the man's face as he does when he looks at Harry or Blaise or Theo or Malfoy. He doesn't understand why it matters. He listens to the testimony of the woman about Merope Gaunt and thinks: *Mum.*

"Harry," Dumbledore says as the wisps of memory fall back into the silver surface of the pensive and Harry strokes Sahara's scales. "Forgive me, but you do not seem particularly engaged today."

Harry stares out of the windows. It's already lunchtime. It's been a long morning. The sky is low. The sun will set soon.

"Why did Hogwarts stop celebrating Samhain?" Harry asks abruptly. Dumbledore raises his eyebrows.

"I didn't know you knew that it ever did," he smiles. "But then, Miss Granger has always been knowledgeable. What do you know of the spirituality of the founders?"

Harry thinks back to everything Severus told him about it at the start of the summer.

"Slytherin worshipped Apep and Nebaku," Harry frowns. "Hufflepuff was ... earth magic, like elemental stuff? Ravenclaw was ... asseti-assessiti -,"

"Asceticism," Dumbledore tents his fingers gently. "Placing value on self-control and vigilance for the pursuit of a loftier goal. In her case, the pure development of the mind."

"Right. No one knows about Gryffindor."

"That's not entirely true. The Peverells knew."

Harry pauses in stroking Sahara's scales.

The names, Master.

"He was a Necromancer, then," Harry says quietly. He won't look up into Dumbledore's eyes. He has secrets to keep.

"That has always been my theory, yes," Dumbledore says. "Do you know the roots of Divination?"

“I know it’s considered a Dark Art in this country,” Harry repeats what Severus told him, something that’s been lodged in the back of his head since Severus spoke the words. “Euro-centric philosophy dictates that any discussion of sentient magic is interwoven with Dark Arts, particularly Necromancy.”

It’s a phrase that he holds onto as a kind of token that he’s not necessarily weird, he’s just weird *here*.

And now, Greenheart.

Yes, well, we don’t all weirdly somehow remember the time of Merlin, Harry glares down at Sahara.

“Severus has been teaching you,” Dumbledore’s voice is soft. “He is not incorrect, of course. There is a western prejudice against Necromancy.”

“Yeah, by calling stuff ‘dark’ when it’s just magic.”

“Here we disagree,” Dumbledore’s voice is a little firmer. “But the roots of divination are in Necromancy. It was originally used to communicate with spirits. That was the cornerstone of Gryffindor’s spirituality; communication with the world beyond. He passed it down, through his line.”

The names, Master. He remembers what Griphook said in the bank: *The Peverells and the Potters, the Peverells and the Gryffindors, the Peverells and the Gaunts...*

“You’re a Dumbledore,” Harry stares at him for a long moment. “Someone told me the Peverells intermarried into Wixen families, like the Potters and the Gaunts and ... the Dumbledores?”

Dumbledore smiles benignly.

“Did Remus ever mention Godric’s Hollow to you?” He says quietly.

“No, why would he?” Harry thinks blankly through everything he knows about Godric’s Hollow. *Green light, darkness, screaming: “Take Harry and run!”* “Wait, someone told me you partly own it, or something?”

“We have a common ancestor, Harry. Godric’s Hollow has been a place of magical residence since the earliest days of Wixen in this country, when some of the earliest Noble and Ancient Houses were formed,” Dumbledore says. “The village that sprung up there was kept and maintained by the Peverells who were forced to hide their name by transforming it.”

“Into Potter.”

“Yes, or transforming themselves through intermarriage to other stronger houses in that small, Wixen community, particularly those who had some claim to those ancient, Hogwarts legacies, like the Bagshots who were said to be descended from Ravenclaw or the Gaunts who were descended from Slytherin or ...”

“The Dumbledores.” Harry looks at him flatly. He remembers what James said in his letter about the Potter magic. *It’s been like that since the time of Godric.* “The ancestor we have in common is Godric. You’re the Heir of Gryffindor.”

Dumbledore spreads his arms wide and looks at Harry with a small smile.

“There is no seat to be held, not like Slytherin which the Gaunts fought hard to maintain for the purposes of blood purity, and there are likely lingering Gryffindor bloodlines in the families far beyond the Dumbledores and the Potters but yes, for the purpose of this conversation, I am,” Dumbledore inclines his head with a twinkle in his eye. “You are well met indeed, Peverell Heir.”

Harry stiffens. He thinks of everything Griphook told him and everything Death has told him. He remembers what Severus told him after Hogsmeade: *Albus will wish you to focus on the Peverell legacy. You must not.*

“I’m not though,” Harry quietly strokes Sahara’s scales, trying not to be drawn. “I’m not a real Potter. I don’t have Potter blood. So I’m not the Peverell heir,” *even if I have the Peverell magic*, “not really.”

“You were blood-adopted, Harry, that matters to the magic,” Dumbledore says. “You can’t hide who you really are.”

Harry almost snorts at that. *You have no idea who I am. No one does.*

Except me, Master; Death whispers behind him. She’s close today, so close that Harry reckons if he turns his head, he’ll be able to see her face.

“Blood isn’t destiny,” Harry says, giving Dumbledore a sharp glance. “Or have we changed our stance on that when it comes to me?”

“We have not. You are no more defined by your blood than I am by my tendency for hair loss, at least, tediously, on the crown of my head,” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkle and Harry feels a cramp of sadness in his stomach because Dumbledore is still, always, very funny when he wants to be. “But what makes us matters, Harry. It offers us a direction in which to go, even if we do not take it.”

“And what does Peverell blood offer me?” Harry asks tightly.

“Necromancy,” Dumbledore’s eyes are very blue. “A powerful branch of magic, ancient and wild.”

“And dark, or so you say,” Harry snorts. “And you don’t want me to learn Dark Magic.”

“Not all Necromancy is dark,” Dumbledore says. “The kind used by some is, certainly.”

“Like Grindlewald. And Tom.”

Dumbledore inclines his head gently.

“He was your friend, wasn’t he?” Harry presses.

“I suppose Mr Nott told you that,” Dumbledore’s voice is soft. Harry shrugs because he’s right and it doesn’t matter much that Dumbledore knows it. Dumbledore’s never going to be team Theo. “Yes, when we were young, I knew him.”

Dumbledore draws something on a piece of paper and pushes it across the table towards Harry. It looks like a weird triangle with a rough circle and a line drawn through it.

“This was Grindelwald’s symbol,” Dumbledore says. He looks pointedly at Harry’s right hand, where he knows the Peverell ring sits. Harry looks down at the scratches on the split stone of the Peverell ring.

“So he wanted the Peverell magic,” Harry shrugs. “So what?”

“The Peverells have a storied history of magic and Necromancy, their three gifts were known across Europe,” Dumbledore says. *Three gifts*, Death whispers. Harry shakes his head to get rid of her voice. “When he was your age. I saw how he took his own natural aptitude, his own gifts for Necromancy, and twisted them, or perhaps was twisted, by Dark Magic in pursuit of deeper charms and power.” Dumbledore gives Harry a long look. “Like you, he was not averse to a little power.”

“Jesus, you’ll never let it go.” Harry’s whole body feels heavy with the weariness of it. “So that happened to Grindelwald and you think it’s going to happen to me? Right.”

“It is not inevitable,” Dumbledore leans forward, his face earnest. “Necromancy is an art that Tom, although he dabbles in various types of blood magic, has never investigated fully because he *fears* death so strongly. Necromancy can be your *strength*, Harry.”

“I don’t get it,” Harry stares at him blankly. “You want me to become a Necromancer? Even though you gave me hell about doing dark spells, even though you’re worried about me being like Tom and Grindlewald, even though it’s *illegal*? The Fell Accords -,”

“Sometimes, Harry, there is a greater threat than Azkaban,” Dumbledore says sadly. “Tom presents such a threat.”

Harry tries not to feel very angry. It doesn’t really work.

“Yeah, when the threat’s not to you,” Harry’s knees are jiggling angrily. “It’s me, isn’t it? Me *again*? I’ll be the Necromancer, I’ll be the illegal one, I’ll be the one the Goblins kick out of the country for breaking the Fell Accords and I’ll be the one who is stripped of his rings and seats and you’ll be still sitting here, watching it happen to me, watching me take the burden of it all *again* -,”

“Harry, I cannot change the past and the choices I made to protect you that you now blame me for,” Dumbledore’s eyes are full of quiet despair but Harry will not feel that. He imagines ice spreading across his mindscape, freezing the air so the molecules in it become still and solid, tiny diamonds of snowflakes. *Don’t care, don’t care, don’t care.* “All I can tell you is that, at every turn, since the prophecy was heard, all I have sought is your survival. That is all

I recommend now. So I ask you: what would you not do to ensure the end of Tom Riddle and your implicit own survival?"

Harry stares at him for a long moment. *What would I not do to survive?* Only one thing pops into his head: *give up Theo.*

"And this is what you think it'll take?" Harry asks coldly. "Me, becoming a Necromancer, whatever the fuck that really means, and the price that comes with it? That's what it's going to cost to defeat Voldemort?"

"Yes. I do." Dumbledore nods but Harry thinks he sees something flicker in his eyes and feels a light scent of lemons on the air. *There's a lie here, somewhere.* "But to confirm it, we will need to access the full memory of Horace."

Harry thinks of the faded edges of it, the complete rejection of Tom by Slughorn which Harry knows is utterly out of character. He sighs heavily.

"I suppose you want me to get that?" Harry stares out of the window at the dark trees of the Forbidden Forest. Suddenly, he wants very much to be there. He has no idea why. "Play on how fucking *desperate* he is for me to like him?"

"Horace has always been woefully vulnerable to the admiration of his students," Dumbledore says gravely. Harry nods.

"Fine then," Harry says. He stands up slowly. Dumbledore looks at him in surprise.

"You will ... get the memory?"

"Yes," Harry doesn't feel anything, just coldness. *Mum died today. James died today. It's my anniversary. He's not said a fucking thing about it.* Dumbledore smiles.

"Thank you, Harry," he says softly. "As always, you are exceptional."

"Exceptionally what?" Harry mutters, tapping Sahara's scales so she shimmers into invisibility.

"Harry?"

"I'm only exceptional in a good way when I do what you want," Harry shrugs at Dumbledore, his mind made of ice. "I'll do what you want this time because it helps me get what *I* want. But it doesn't make me a Necromancer."

"I understand," Dumbledore nods slowly. "But it will help you survive, and as always, that is all that matters."

Harry stares at him. He almost believes him. Then he remembers: Cedric's dead and he's alone in Privet Drive, unable to sleep, thinking he's going mad with grief and *no one* writes to him. *Don't think about it, don't think about it, bury that shit.* Harry throws books into the lake inside his mind, and watches it freeze over. When he speaks, his breath is so cold it mists on the warm air around him.

“ You said you can’t change the past,” Harry swallows down his own grief as he stares at Dumbledore’s icy blue eyes, safe that there is nothing in his frozen mindscape to be plucked or seen. “The choices you made to protect me, the ones that hurt me -,”

“They were not made to hurt you -,”

“But they did,” Harry cuts him off. “You said you can’t change them, but would you change them, if you could? Would you do it all differently?”

Dumbledore looks at him for a long moment and looks, suddenly, very old. Harry watches as his eyes drift to the blackened hand resting on the desk.

“Ah, regret,” Dumbledore murmurs. “A constant friend.”

“Would you?” Harry pushes.

“I fear that knowing what I know now about how it would hurt you would still not relieve me of the burden of adequately protecting you with the resources I had in hand,” he whispers, face drawn.

“That’s not an answer,” Harry says firmly. “Tell the truth.”

Dumbledore doesn’t wince. Harry doesn’t flinch. They both stare at one another, knowing he sounds like Tom in the orphanage. Harry doesn’t care. *Tom had the measure of Dumbledore back then*, Harry thinks coldly. *He lies*.

He always lies, a distant voice whispers. It might be Tom so Harry slams the doors to his mind on it and tries for a more pleasing tone.

“Please,” he adds. Dumbledore sighs.

“You force me to be honest so I shall.” He gives Harry a long look before speaking. Harry doesn’t hold his breath. He’s known what’s coming since he asked. “No, Harry. I do not know what I could have done differently, knowing *all* that I know.”

Harry stares. *Don’t feel it, don’t care, don’t care, won’t care*.

But part of Harry is roaring with sadness and rage because the one person, the *one* person who could have changed everything for him has said that they wouldn’t lift a finger to do it.

No one rescues us, Sirius said in Grimmauld Place. Harry realises one thing: Dumbledore won’t save him from anything unless it helps end Voldemort and Harry was stupid to think he ever would.

Severus would, a voice whispers. *Remus would*. So those are the people Harry’s going to care about.

“Well then,” Harry nods and looks down at his hands. There is ice growing under his nails.

“That’s that.”

“Harry, you must understand my priorities -,”

“No, you can understand mine,” Harry cuts him off. “I want to make sure the people who matter to me live through this, that’s *all* I care about. So I’ll get you your memory from Slughorn and I’ll help you get rid of Voldemort if it’s even possible.”

“And then?” Dumbledore asks softly. Harry shrugs.

“And then that curse in your arm is going to kill you and I’ll either be alive to see that or I won’t be. Either way, that’ll be us done, won’t it?”

Dumbledore’s eyes are glassy but he nods.

“Yes, Harry,” he says softly. “When I am dead and Voldemort is defeated, we will both be done.”

Harry nods.

“Okay then. Nice chat.” Harry turns and walks out of the room. He doesn’t think about it as he walks down the small staircase and along the corridor, seeing a tall window at the end of it. Beyond it, he can see the forest. He just knows, can feel it in his bones that he wants to be in it. *Out of this castle and away from this shit.*

The magic of the castle cannot carry you that far, Sahara hisses in his ear.

Well, I’m supposed to have wings, aren’t I? Harry assesses the distance as he presses his hand against the glass and lets the Slytherin magic melt it into sand. The breeze is suddenly hefty, ruffling his hair and buffeting his school robes. There’s pure anger in his blood that if he lets overtake him, he is sure will bring Tom’s sneering voice crashing into his mind. *Don’t think about it.* Harry wants to stop thinking altogether. The Black magic is glowing impatiently from his limbs.

Can you make me invisible for this? Harry asks Sahara and she hisses, pulling them both into invisibility. Harry climbs up onto the windowsill and takes a deep breath, listening to the songs of the black magic, letting them build to a pitch inside him just like he did yesterday with the Goblin King.

Are you sure you can fly, Greenheart? Sahara sounds anxious.

I am sure I can fly, Harry says firmly. *I might not be able to shift properly, but I can fly.*

The human form is not supposed to fly. Like snakes.

Tough, we’re doing it. Harry holds onto the edges of the wall, leaning forward dangerously. *We’re going to fly. I need to do something to stop thinking. I need to fly.*

Harry’s more determined than he’s ever been in his life. He must do this. He closes his eyes and feels the wind around him and then, the roar of the Black magic rushing through him, making the wings appear at his shoulders. Inside his head, he can see the eyes of the Black Prince smiling.

You better catch me, Harry thinks dazedly. Then he lets himself fall.

It's perfect. It's glorious. Harry loves the feeling of the fall, like tipping a broom down and plummeting, knowing it will catch him. The wings do, in a beautiful swoop as he instinctively twists his body to shoot between the main tower and the astronomy tower. He turns his head and sees Death swooping beside him and laughs aloud.

Are you following me? He grins, not caring about his sore shoulder or Sahara hissing death threats to him from around his neck.

The veil is thin today, Death grins back, which is a bit uncanny. *We are closer, Master.*

Come on then, Harry grins and catches an updraft over the tops of the treetops, not caring that his whoops and laughter can probably be heard on the wind around the castle.

Your mate is close, Greenheart, Sahara says.

Huh?

Harry looks down as he flaps his wings over the forest, seeing two clearings separated by a line of trees. One is filled with Thestrals and in the other, he notices a dark-haired boy who makes his chest clench, the bond recognising him immediately. He grins and does exactly what Tonks taught him yesterday and slowly flaps his wings, ignoring the twinge in his shoulders as he does so.

Your body is not made for this, Greenheart, Sahara warns.

Don't care, Harry feels a bit dizzy with the growing pain in his back as he descends below the tree line. *Make me visible again.*

He wants nothing more than to see the look on Theo's face when he does this. Sahara hisses grumpily and as he descends, close enough that Theo has stared up, probably feeling the breeze from his massive wings, she removes the invisibility. Harry is near enough to see Theo's eyes widen. He takes a rapid step backwards.

"Hello!" Harry calls jovially, hoping his legs don't look dumb just kind of dangling as his wings descend. He tries not to flap his arms in a mimicking motion but it's hard not to.

"What the fuck - what the FUCK are you doing?" Theo yells at him, dropping his basket of whatever Severus has sent him out to gather. "You can't - *Odin*, you can't fly around the *fucking forest* like a damned ICARUS -,"

"You are in trouble," Sahara hisses sliding away down Harry's body as soon as they are inches from the ground. *"I told you."*

"Hey, hey, it's fine," Harry lands in front of Theo and cups his face. He doesn't mean to, but immediately his wings, which are wider than his arms and full of dark feathers, like a raven's,

though they glitter with white light, wrap around Theo too, gently nudging him into Harry's arms. "I didn't mean to scare you, I'm sorry -,"

"You're sorry? You - you -," Theo's eyes are blazing silver and Harry thinks he might really be in trouble, but then Theo kisses him, rougher than he's ever kissed him before and Harry feels pure desire thrumming through the bond. *Oh wow.* Theo's fingers are scrambling to pull his t-shirt up and Harry's are trembling to unbutton Theo's shirt. "You can't fucking *fly* in front of me and then just -,"

"What's an Icarus?" Harry manages to say breathlessly as Theo walks him backwards towards a tree.

"Man with wings, doesn't matter," Theo's hands are gripping Harry's waist and his lips have found Harry's rune mark. When he kisses it, Harry arches into his touch and white magic trembles down his wings. Theo looks at them greedily. "Are they sensitive? Can I touch them, or -?"

"Let's find out," Harry grins and Theo looks at him with those predator wolf eyes, kissing Harry wildly, his hands stroking feathers in a way that Harry can't really feel but imagines Theo must be enjoying by the way he pushes Harry firmly back against the tree. Immediately, an explosion of pain happens in between Harry's shoulder blades. "Ah! Fuck!"

"What?" Theo steps back, his hands in the air, looking Harry over worriedly.

"My back," Harry gasps, his eyes watering. "Sahara says humans aren't meant to fly, I shouldn't - I shouldn't do it like this when I haven't completely shifted, I just -,"

"Alright, alright," Theo's voice is very calm. "Just ... put the wings away and I'll look at it."

"Okay." Harry squeezes his eyes tight and stretches out his left hand, deliberately pulling all of the magic down from his back, along his arm, and back into the ring on his hand. As he does, the pain intensifies across his shoulder blades and he realises he hasn't just strained them. He might have torn something. "*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck -,*"

I did warn you, Sahara whispers inside his mind.

"*Go and hunt something,*" Harry hisses crossly.

"Harry?" Theo approaches as Harry crouches down, trembling all over.

"I, uh, I really shouldn't have done this," Harry gasps, sweating. "I, um, I think - I think I broke something? I - I didn't feel it at first because of the magic in the wings, but now -,"

"Okay, okay," Theo says soothingly, gently pulling Harry's t-shirt up. "I'm going to cast a diagnostic spell, alright? *Ossa revelio!*"

Harry feels the spell spread along his spine and winces.

"Is it okay?" He says nervously. The last thing he needs is a fucking broken back and he cannot imagine how pissed Severus will be if he finds out he injured himself whilst

shapeshifting badly. *He'll never let me fly again.*

"Nothing is broken," Theo says softly. "I'm going to cast another. *Lacerti revelio!*"

This one stings. Harry grits his teeth and tilts his head back.

"You've torn some of the muscles in your shoulder blades," Theo says quietly. "I think I can heal it with my heir ring and we'll get a muscle balm on it in the castle."

"Sure," Harry closes his eyes and feels the sweet, delicate coolness of Theo's heir magic sweep through his sore muscles and Harry sighs to smell it, the burnt parchments, the salt of a sea crashing against grey rocks far away. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Theo sits behind him and carefully pulls Harry back, so he is leaning against him as Theo leans against the tree.

"Well," Harry says sarcastically. "That's ruined any plans you had to pull me as a *literal* bird-man."

"Pull you - oh, *pull* you, the muggle phrasing," Theo clicks his tongue. "Outrageous, Potter. We haven't even completed our fifth gift exchange. Kreacher would destroy me."

"Yeah, he would," Harry smiles to himself. "Well, you have a birthday coming up."

They've not talked about it, not really, Harry's not sure if he'll be ready for heart-bonding, but the way it felt when Theo pushed him back against the tree, fingers dancing along the top of Harry's jeans was amazing. He didn't think of Cedric once. *Maybe things are changing there.* Theo breathes out slowly and Harry winces at the differing pressure on his spine. Theo notices and strokes his shoulders, adding a little more of the cooling heir magic into Harry's skin. Harry moans gratefully.

"Why did you do this?" Theo asks quietly.

"You didn't like seeing me as a bird man?"

"Of course I did but you're hurt, Harry, it seems ..." Theo hesitates but Harry can feel the word he tries never to say around Harry anymore: *reckless*. Harry sighs heavily.

"Dumbledore pissed me off," he mutters. "He says I need to get this memory from Slughorn to help with defeating Voldemort but he just ... he never stops *asking* stuff of me, he doesn't even care what today is, that's it's the anniversary of ... y'know. He didn't even mention it."

Theo strokes Harry's hair gently until he is a bit calmer.

"We can get it together," Theo says. "The memory."

"Both of us?"

“We’re potions partners. We have that project we have to do together in November. We can go and see him together.”

“And do what?”

“Well,” Theo says slowly. “I suppose we could get him drunk and see if he’ll just give it up.”

Harry laughs.

“That sounds rank when you say it like that,” Harry chuckles.

“Honestly,” Theo rolls his eyes. “You’re worse than Blaise.”

“Am not,” Harry elbows him. “I guess we’ll call that Plan B.”

“What’s plan A?”

“I guess ... try and charm him?” Harry rubs his forehead. It seems impossible. “He likes you.”

“He does,” Theo says wryly. “But he covets you.”

“Ugh, God, he’s slimy.”

“I’m sorry Dumbledore upset you,” Theo kisses the back of Harry’s neck and makes him shiver.

“It’s fine, I just ... I miss people today,” Harry mumbles. *Mum. James. Sirius. Arthur. Cedric.*

“That makes sense, Harry.” They both turn to see Luna walking between the trees, the thestrals walking with her. She’s wearing antlers on her head entwined with flowers and somehow, looks less weird than normal. “Today is the day we miss people.”

“What are you doing here?” Harry asks.

“I’m going to start a bonfire,” Luna says breezily. “It’s Samhain.”

“Fae have their own traditions,” Theo says. He gestures to Luna’s head. “Is this to keep spirits away?”

“Muggles think we do it to stop the fairies from taking us but really, it holds us to this realm,” Luna holds up a triangle made of twigs. “The veil is thin today.”

“Yes, it is,” Harry smiles.

“Will you join me? I’d like you to.” Luna sets the triangle down in the centre of the clearing, making small furrows in the dirt around it. Harry and Theo both get up and sit with her, each on a side of the triangle. It’s strange, but as soon as they do, Harry feels that intense calm he felt the night before when they walked through the party together. As if Luna’s magic is a

perfect blend, tasting like fresh water and deep lakes, whilst Theo's is bright and vivid, crashing thunderstorms. Harry takes a deep breath and looks at Luna. Theo looks confused and a bit suspicious, just like he did yesterday at the party.

"It's because of the veil," Luna smiles.

"It's thin," Harry stretches his legs out to the side, leaning back on his hands. "She told me messages will be heard."

"She? *Hel* told you that?" Theo raises his eyebrows. "You've seen her today?"

"Yeah, it's All Hallows Eve, she's around," Harry shrugs. *Is she around because I'm a Necromancer?* That makes Harry think of Dumbledore and frown.

"The Headmaster troubles you," Luna says flatly. She hands Theo and Harry sprigs of rosemary and then begins stripping the leaves, sprinkling them over the wooden triangle. Theo and Harry copy her. Harry doesn't see any point in lying to Luna. In fact, sitting with her and Theo like this, with the scent of their combined magic on his every breath, he's not actually sure he could lie to her.

"He wants me to be a Necromancer, like the Peverells," Harry sighs. "He thinks it's how I'll defeat Voldemort but he also says necromancy is dangerous and he's worried that I'll be like Grindelwald." Harry stretches his finger and pulls the Peverell ring into visibility. He traces the mark under the split stone with his finger. "This is Grindelwald's mark, apparently."

"Or he nicked the Peverell mark," Theo shrugs.

"It's neither and both," Luna says, plucking flowers from her antlers to drop onto the triangle. "It's the mark of the three brothers."

"The three brothers," Theo frowns. "From the children's story? From Beedle the Bard?"

"Beedle the Bard?" Harry smirks. "That's a ridiculous name."

"More ridiculous than Rumpelstiltskin?" Theo raises an eyebrow. "Please."

"They had names," Luna says. "Ignotus, Cadmus, and Antioch."

"Wait, I know those names," Harry stares at her for a moment. "They're in the Potter Grimoire. So they were Peverells?"

"I'm sorry, we're saying that the fictional three brothers, one of whom had a weapon that seems to be the elder wand, were *real*? And Peverells to boot?" Theo asks.

"I don't know," Luna shrugs. "Daddy thinks so."

"I'm not sure that the endorsement of the editor of *The Quibbler* helps," Theo says.

"Dumbledore did say the Peverells had ... three gifts, or something?" Harry frowns.

“In the story, it's a cloak of invisibility, a stone of resurrection and the wand of great power,” Luna says. Harry glances at Theo who is biting his lip and frowning.

“Well, I have one of those,” Harry jokes. “And I’m looking for another.”

“Maybe the others are coming to you,” Luna smiles. “The other hallows.”

“Hallows,” Harry rubs his forehead. He feels sure someone said that word to him before but right now, he can’t catch the memory long enough to bring it into focus.

“You have an invisibility cloak, you *don't* have a Deathly Hallow, and you’re looking for a very powerful wand that appears in legends across a range of cultures, not just one children’s story. So maybe that’s just what it is,” Theo frowns. “A children’s story.”

“Stories matter,” Luna says softly.

“They do, of course, culturally, but it’s supremely unlikely that the legendary tools of the Three Brothers truly exist.”

“There once were two boys. One was destined for power, one for sacrifice and both for slavery of different kinds,” Luna pulls a little bottle of oil out of her pocket and begins sprinkling it over the herbs, twigs and flowers. “Then they found one another, a Sorcerer and a Mage, and changed their futures. It’s nothing more than a story, it’s supremely unlikely, as you say, and yet ...” Luna smiles at them both. “Here you are.”

Your fae cannot lie, Death whispers. Harry can’t see her in his peripheral vision and he knows if he turns to look towards the Thestral field, she’ll be standing there.

“Wait, am I the boy who was destined for power or sacrifice?” Harry frowns. Luna just smiles at him enigmatically.

“That’s ... well, that’s very romantic but ...” Theo looks torn between moved and exasperated. “It’s different.”

“How?” Luna settles her ethereally blue eyes on Theo. “You are the impossible come to life, Theodore Nott. You are the child changing his future - do you not see how unlikely it is that you would become the Sorcerer? That you would love the Mage? That you would develop the bond you have?”

“I ...” Theo looks at Harry a little desperately. Harry reaches out and takes Theo’s hand, pressing thoughts to him through the bond. *Are the Deathly Hallows really more weird and unlikely than a soul bond with a Mage?*

“Shut up,” Theo clicks his teeth but flushes. Harry gives Theo a fond look.

“Maybe it’s like the myth thing.”

“I told you, we’re not using that word around you,” Theo scowls.

“Maybe it is the word we should use for all of us,” Luna says simply, setting her wand tip to the twigs and flowers. They burst into a merry triangle of flame. “We are three, after all.”

The words have an interesting impact. The triangle of flames rises higher and Harry thinks, just for a moment, he hears whispers in it. Theo squeezes his hand and is looking down at Harry’s fingers, which are glowing with gold light underneath the skin.

“Don’t worry,” Harry says, shaking his left hand. “That’s a Luna thing.”

“It is a Harry and Luna thing,” Luna says proudly, showing Theo her skin and the green leaves underneath them. “And a Theodore thing too. We are three.”

“I still don’t know what it means,” Theo mutters.

It means you are three, Death whispers.

So fucking helpful, Harry thinks back at her with a frown.

“Me either.” *But that’s not unusual,* Harry thinks wryly to himself and swears he can hear a Grim barking with laughter on the wind. Harry shakes his head and looks at Luna. “Do you?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter,” Luna says cheerfully. “I trust the patterns. I trust the stories of my kind, the legend of Nimue. I trust my own power and I trust you both.”

“You do?” Theo raises his eyebrows.

“You are kind and honest and it feels right when we are together,” Luna says simply. “Doesn’t it?”

Theo and Harry look at one another.

Why does it feel right? Theo thinks at him, his eyes glowing like silver pennies in the firelight.

Because it’s supposed to, I guess, Harry thinks back. Theo looks resigned for a moment and then nods.

“And I suppose if we can be like Nimue and Merlin and Morgana then the elder wand could be real,” Harry continues out loud. “So could ... what are they called? The Hallows?”

“The Deathly Hallows,” Luna says.

“Weird name,” Harry shrugs and turns back to Theo. “What do you think?”

Theo stares at the flame. There is a tautness in his jaw that Harry recognises. Theo isn’t like him and Luna. Harry knows that for them both there’s so much instinct in it all. Harry trusts Luna because her magic tastes and feels so right around him but Theo doesn’t have all of that, not the way they do. Whilst Harry’s bones shimmer gold under his skin and Luna’s leaves grow dark against her veins, Theo looks exactly the same.

Because he is the Sorcerer, Death whispers. The human.

Hey, I'm a bit human, Harry protests.

You are yourself, Master, Death chuckles. More yourself on this day than others.

"There are many things I don't understand, lots of things I need to read but ... yes," Theo says, interrupting Harry's internal chat. He takes a deep breath and squeezes Harry's hand. "Somehow, I don't struggle to believe that we are ... three."

Luna smiles and hands Theo a sprig of sage.

"You will read and learn and scheme and defend and then you will know with your mind what your spirit has understood," she says calmly. That seems like a big list to Harry but Theo actually looks sort of encouraged by it and nods firmly, staring determinedly into the flame as he twiddles his sage sprig between his fingers.

"But even if they are all real, if the hallows exist, if the elder wand is out there, it might not mean anything," he mutters. "It might not ... help us. It might be nothing more than a story."

"Yeah, it might not help with Tom." Harry sighs and looks up into the sky. The sun has already ducked below the trees and they are shadowed. *Maybe none of it helps. Maybe he wins anyway and I'm living on borrowed time.* "But we have to try."

"We can only trust who we are, Harry of Merlin, and learn the lessons of those who have crossed the veil before us," Luna hands him a sprig of sage with a smile. "My people feed them into the fire and send messages to those beyond the veil."

"Messages will be heard," Harry says. "That's what Death told me."

"Hel told you we can send messages through the veil?" Theo raises his eyebrows and then shakes his head. "Of course she did."

"I have a message for Mummy," Luna says, feeding her sage into the fire. "I love you, Mummy. I miss you."

Harry feels the darkness around them creeping closer as the fire blooms brighter in the triangle. Theo and Luna's faces are suddenly both lit up, Luna's white hair glowing and Theo's silver eyes dancing and Harry can taste both of their magic, electricity and water on his tongue. For a moment he feels breathless, just for a second, with how ... *noble* and wise they both look. Like characters from a storybook. *Like myths and legends.* Theo doesn't look at Harry but hesitantly feeds his sprig of sage into the fire, following Luna's lead.

"Heart be the bolder," he murmurs under his breath. Harry knows it's for his parents. Harry watches the smoke gather above the flames and could swear that he sees a Grim in it, chasing the soft ash with its snapping jaws, devouring messages and running through the veil with them. Harry stares at the flame as he feeds his sprig of sage into it. *Mum. James. Cedric. Arthur. Sirius.*

What messages will you send? Death whispers behind him.

“Thank you,” Harry’s words are stuck in his teeth but he forces them through. *Thank you for dying for me.* “I’m sorry. I ... I miss you all.”

He lifts his head to watch the smoke rise and, as the afternoon sun sets fully, pulling in the early darkness, he sees a familiar constellation beginning to wink its way into visibility against the deep, navy blue sky: *Canis Major. The dogstar.* Harry smiles.

When Harry goes to bed early that night, alone for once because of his persistent headache, he dreams again. This time he doesn’t dream of Sirius or the place beyond the veil where the fires burn, instead, he dreams of his Mum. It is not a picture, not an image inside his mind. Instead, it’s a feeling. One of being warm and held and loved and so perfectly and entirely safe that it can only be Mum. Mum alive, Mum present, Mum hugging and loving him and being wonderfully *here*. When he wakes up, he’s crying. He doesn’t think about it but he knows where he needs to be. He fumbles a hand to the wall behind him and dissolves into the magic of Hogwarts, relieved to be without thought or fear for a few blissful moments. Then he reforms in a familiar living room, hand pressed to the wall, and when his eyes become his own again, he sees Severus sitting in his chair.

“Harrison?”

Severus is on his feet in a second, stepping closer, eyes full of worry and pulling a headache reliever out of his pocket. Harry wipes his cheeks hastily and shakes his head.

“I just ...” He can’t put words to what he felt. The endless happiness of having her and the sadness and grief of wanting her. Seeing Severus, his concerned expression, helps a bit. Harry takes a deep breath. “Can I stay down here tonight?”

“Of course,” Severus nods. He walks to the kettle and switches it on. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Harry looks at the clock on the wall. It’s quarter to midnight. He nods and sits down on the sofa. There are strange looking black candles sitting on the table, bubbly in texture, like honeycomb.

“What are these?”

“They are remembrance candles,” Severus says quietly, pouring hot water on a mix of tea leaves that Harry can smell across the room. It’s a camomile and blue star flower and liquorice blend and Harry feels some of his sadness eke away when it reaches his nostrils. “They burn all night long and will not catch fire to anything else.”

“Why do you have them?”

Severus crosses back to Harry and sets the mug down in front of him on the coffee table. Then he lowers himself into his chair, the leather creaking underneath him. Harry realises how comforting these small facts of Severus’ existence have become to him - the sounds and smells that soften the painful edges that threaten Harry on every side.

“My mother would light them at Samhain to remember her father.”

“The man you called ... *pedar*?”

Severus gives him a small, approving smile as he tries to sound out the word in a language he doesn't understand.

“Yes,” Severus sips his own tea, his eyes on the candles in Harry's hand.

“You have two, is it one for each person?”

“No, the second is for you. I was about to send it to you.”

Severus nods towards the piece of parchment, folded on the tabletop. Harry unwinds it and reads the note.

At this time of year, your mother and I used to carve pumpkins in the garden and light them and then trick or treat together. She liked toffees and dressing up like a cat and ducking for apples. Her favourite ghost story was A Christmas Carol.

“Remember me when I am gone away,

Gone far away into the silent Land.”

S.S

“Christina Rosetti,” Harry smiles. “I thought you found her sentimental.”

“There are certain times when sentiment is appropriate,” Severus says. “This tradition belonged to her and now it is yours too if you want it.”

Harry rubs his thumb over the textured surface of the candle.

“I've never carved a pumpkin,” Harry says.

“It is tedious and messy,” Severus pauses. “But we could try it, if you want.”

Harry imagines the doorstep of Spinners End alight with pumpkins and smiles.

“Maybe,” Harry runs his fingers over the words. This small act of generosity, of Severus gifting him tidbits of his mother's past seems astonishingly joyful, suddenly. “What did you dress up as?”

“Nothing, Halloween was the one time of year when I could dress normally and everyone presumed I was merely wearing the costume of a Victorian child,” Severus says wryly and Harry smirks.

“I've always hated Halloween, even before I knew about when mum and James died,” Harry frowns. “And it wasn't just that Dudley ate all the sweets and chased me. I was sad. Maybe I knew.”

“Maybe,” Severus hesitates. “You already remember more of that night than I wish.”

“Yeah,” Harry swallows. “It’s just sounds and voices and stuff.”

“It’s what you dreamed of tonight?”

Harry doesn’t need to ask how Severus knows he’s had a nightmare.

“No,” Harry shakes his head and smiles ruefully. “The opposite actually. I dreamt that she was alive and ... loved me.”

“She did. She does.” Harry throws Severus a confused look and he shrugs slightly. “I may not prescribe to the same kind of spirituality that Theodore does or indeed, the same kind of atheism that Remus has, but I have always followed Philip Larkin’s suggestion.”

“What? *They fuck you up, your Mum and Dad?*” Harry frowns and then instantly realises how stupid and insensitive that is, but Severus, surprisingly, doesn’t glare at him.

“Language and no,” he says. “I have always seen the logic in the last line from his poem, *An Arundel Tomb: what will survive of us is love.*”

“Yeah,” Harry nods slowly, thinking about Sirius talking of bonds behind the veil in his dream the night before. “I think so too.”

Harry clicks his fingers on his right hand until a spark of the Slytherin magic appears and holds it over a candle to catch the wick.

“Do I have to say any words?”

“No,” Severus shakes his head. He stands and slowly comes to sit beside Harry on the leather sofa, picking up the second candle and lighting it from Harry’s. “You may think of and remember the ones you have loved and lost however you please.”

“What do you do?”

Severus hesitates and sets his candle in the silver candle holder that is waiting for it.

“I speak to the person I miss most on this day,” he says quietly.

The veil is thin.

Harry stares into the candlelight and thinks he sees Death loitering in the shadows it catches. He wonders what he would say to his Mum if she were right there with him.

I love Theo, Mum, Harry finds himself saying to the flame. That's the boy with the snake and the amazing silver eyes. He loves me too. I hope you like him. I miss you.

Harry looks into the orange flame and imagines red hair, a sweet smile he can’t remember but that he still feels in his body, warming him like hot tea. A soothing touch. *Home.* Beside him, Severus’ presence and the scent of his magic, herbal and warm, is comforting.

“Will we be able to do this next year?” Harry asks quietly.

“I hope so, *farzandam*,” Severus whispers, his dark eyes dancing orange with the reflection of the flame. Beyond the veil, Harry knows that messages will be heard.

Chapter End Notes

"Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay...."
Remember by Christina Rossetti.

"They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you...."
This be the Verse by Philip Larkin:

"...Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love."
An Arundel Tomb by Philip Larkin

Horace

Chapter Notes

Warning: Sexual Abuse of a Minor (Not an MC).

This story is about trauma in every direction. Please pay CLOSE attention to the tags.

This time: Harry and Theo learn the truth.

Next time: Harry looks for justice.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Just try it, Harry.

Don't want to. It's weird.

Harry.

Ugh. Fine.

I don't hear anything.

The last time this worked I was literally being tortured. Why do you want to practice this?

Our bond is unique. It's good to test the bounds of its capacity.

Okay. I could feel you when I was flying, by the way. Maybe before that.

What do you mean?

I dunno. When I looked out the window and saw the Forest it was like I wanted to be there.

I don't experience it that way, more I feel the bond when you're nearby. Or when you're really, really hurt.

So why are we doing this?

When you were taken, you could send me your pain. I couldn't send anything back.

That's not true. I heard that you loved me. I heard it.

What if I could have sent more?

Like what?

Like how we talk without words sometimes when we're close enough. What if we could have done that?

That would have been cool, I guess. And helpful.

So that's why we practice.

You're lucky I love you.

I concur.

- - - - -

Any luck with Slughorn? I think he's been avoiding me.

That's strange. It's not like Dumbledore would tell him what you're supposed to do.

Maybe he used legilimency when I wasn't paying attention.

That seems unlikely.

Why?

Most people never feel the Headmaster's legilimency but due to your magical sensitivity, you know what it feels and tastes like.

Magical sensitivity?

We can call it 'glowy fingers and weird smelling' if you like.

Yes please. I got a note from Dumbledore today.

What did I say?

He wants a meeting at the end of this week.

He's pushing you to get Slughorn's memory.

It is the middle of November.

It's not your fault a grown man and teacher is reticent to reveal his innermost thoughts to a student.

We need to get it done. I'm not going to this meeting without it. Besides, we need to get shit moving. Dumbledore's hand looks fucking gross.

Are you worried the curse is progressing?

Well, if it's like he dies slowly from his hand upward, then most of his arm looks dead right now. That's pretty fast.

It is. Plan B then?

Oh god. Yeah. I guess it'll have to be plan B.

Tomorrow night.

- - - -

Theo stares at the door of Slughorn's private dining room, preparing himself to knock.

"So we're doing this?" Harry mutters to Theo as they stand outside Slughorn's office, shifting uncomfortably in his silver robes. "Get him drunk, get the memory?"

"Exactly." Theo is holding a bottle of wine. It's a Barolo, Blaise helped him pick it. He wishes he could have brought mead instead. It's stronger, after all, more fit for purpose. It's the third Saturday in November and Theo wants to get this done. It's less than a month until his birthday on the 14th of December and he can feel the net tightening around him. If Dumbledore has an idea of weapons or information that might strengthen his position as a

neutral Lord and increase Harry's chance of surviving the Dark Lord, Theo wants it. To get it, he needs Slughorn.

"You know he's going to talk our fucking ears off."

"Yes."

It's not a pleasant prospect but Theo knocks on the door all the same. Slughorn appears, wearing a burgundy dressing gown over his robes and holding a glass of wine. He smiles broadly when he sees them, which Theo finds strange, because for the last two weeks, Professor Slughorn has certainly been more restrained around him. Theo looks at the glass of wine in his hand and wonders, suddenly, if the reason that he is suddenly so relaxed is that this is the first time either of them has seen Slughorn inebriated since Halloween.

"My Prodigy!" Slughorn gives Theo a lazy wink before his eyes fix on Harry. "And one half of my golden couple! What brings you to my door tonight?"

"We wanted to talk about our Potions project," Harry says.

"Ah yes, well, you will have to become used to one another, I'm sure," Slughorn chortles, sipping his wine and giving them a strange, knowing sort of look. "Any complaints will fall on deaf ears."

"We don't wish to complain, sir," Theo says smoothly. "We want to discuss an idea we have for a memory modification potion."

"We brought something to get us started." Harry takes the bottle of wine out of Theo's hands and pushes it towards Slughorn. He looks down at it and then bursts into laughter, staring fondly at Theo.

"Oh, you are just like your father, aren't you, yes you are," Slughorn shakes his head and steps back. "Come in, boys, I always have time for my Prodigy."

As they move forward, Theo feels Harry's parseltongue hiss pass through the bond: *he's such a fucking wanker*. Theo privately agrees and prepares for a thoroughly tiresome evening.

Four glasses in and Slughorn is regaling them, once again, about Apollonius.

"He was such a good sport, your father," Slughorn sighs. "Not a Potioneer by any standards, but a generous sport, all the same. I was terribly fond of him."

"Speaking of Potions, sir, we have a notion -," Theo cuts in.

"Well, I am sure *you* have a notion, Prodigy," Slughorn chuckles drunkenly, reaching across to pat Theo's shoulder and then gives Harry a roguish smile. "Come now, Potter! You may be one half of an exemplary engagement but you are no genius!"

“And you’re a dick,” Harry mutters under his breath. Theo kicks him under the table. Harry switches on a fixed, winning smile. “It’s Potter-*Black*, sir.”

“Oh yes, your dear grandfather, Orion was a great friend of mine, you must know.” Slughorn sighs, looking towards his rows and rows of photographs of the Slugclub through the ages. Theo has noticed previously that any years that would have contained the Dark Lord, the young Tom Riddle, have been removed. “But your father, young Sirius, slipped through my fingers even though Regulus, your uncle, now he was a delight! He never joined my little club but he was a lovely Slytherin.”

“Yeah well, my Gryffindor Dad wasn’t much for dinner parties,” Harry says, his smile strained as it always is when other people talk of Black.

“Oh, I’ve had *many* Gryffindors in my little club but not your father, oh, how he was always trouble!” Slughorn laughs loudly. “Smoking behind the greenhouses, that great motorbike of his! So terribly rebellious, with all that muggle rubbish. How I would have liked him for my set.”

“I bet you would have,” Harry mutters and Theo grits his teeth, forcing his thoughts through the bond without touching. They might not be great at long distance thought projection yet, no matter how much Theo presses Harry to practice, but close like this, it’s easier than ever before.

Behave, Theo thinks firmly.

Words come back to him, pushed firmly with the strength of Harry’s will: *I don’t like how he talks about people*. Theo doesn’t like it much either, but he presses on. Dumbledore wants his damn memory and won’t help Harry without it so Theo’s going to get it for him.

“We had an idea, sir, for a potion that dissolves shameful memories,” Theo goes on, trying to draw Slughorn back to present. He also deems that Slughorn is just drunk enough that they can risk it.

“Excellent, Prodigy!” Slughorn sloppily reaches forward and patronisingly taps Theo’s hand on the table. Harry scowls. “And you come for help?”

“Well, yes sir,” Theo takes a deep breath. “We’ve begun testing it, of course, but the Potions project needs to have impact on *others* not just the brewers -,”

“We’d like a memory, sir,” Harry says, abruptly. Theo shoots him an exasperated look. *Typical Gryffindor*.

“You’re welcome to any of them!” Slughorn launches to his feet and then comes back with a bottle of firewhisky with a label around the collar that simply reads, *To the Professors*. “We have had the grape now let us have the grain - had thought to keep it for the Christmas party later on but, well, why should Albus and Minerva have all the fun? You’re a lover of mead, aren’t you Potter-Black? Well, this particular blend of firewhisky -,”

“We have a certain memory in mind,” Harry interrupts. “Something shameful.”

“Oh?” Slughorn looks up from struggling with the cork. “It’s not that time that Dumbledore transfigured me into a sofa is it?”

“We understand ... you were acquainted with Lord Gaunt,” Theo says. “That you had ... a unique bond.”

Slughorn looks between them, his eyes red rimmed but, Theo realises, full of awareness. *Not so drunk, then.*

“These are interesting things to discuss,” Slughorn’s voice is cautious, his eyes dancing between Harry and Theo and then fluttering back. “Of course, Prodigy, I ... anticipated that *you* may have an interest, but to speak of it ... with a Potter -,”

“And a Black,” Harry says languidly, leaning back in his chair. “You keeping forgetting the Black part, sir. Most people don’t.”

Harry gestures to his face and then points at his ring. Theo bites back the urge to laugh.

“We are Potions partners, sir,” Theo stands and gently takes the bottle from Slughorn’s hands to pull out the cork. He flips open his knife, sticks it into the cork and easily twists it out, even as Slughorn’s hand rests uncomfortably on his shoulder. “We are committed to getting the best NEWTS we can.”

“Most unusual. I had anticipated ... well, a certain animosity ...” Slughorn mutters, sitting heavily back into his chair, looking between them. “You are ... acquaintances then?”

“He’s friends with my fiancé,” Harry nods at Theo and Theo tries urgently not to grimace at the word. “They have an alliance.”

“He’s my friend’s fiancé,” Theo echoes. “And in this we have ... similar aims.”

“You do?” Slughorn stares at them. “You have *similar aims* in wanting to view and dissolve *this* particular memory? God knows how you even heard about it -,”

“Dumbledore,” Harry says flippantly. Theo wonders if that’s a wise move but the way Slughorn slumps is extreme.

“Albus,” he rubs his forehead. “Of course. I had forgotten, Potter, your acquaintance with the Headmaster, your own ... unique bond.”

At those words, Slughorn’s eyes become slightly vicious as they look at Harry. Theo holds his breath, because he actually doesn’t know how Harry will take that. He watches as Harry merely gives Slughorn a short, mirthless smile which scarily, reminds Theo of Sirius Black.

“The conversation you had with Tom Riddle,” Harry leans forward, green eyes fixed on Slughorn. For some reason, Slughorn flinches at the name. “I have my reasons for wanting that conversation.”

“Yes, I imagine you do, or rather, *Albus* does,” Slughorn mutters, eyeing Harry with a surprising dislike as he pours a glass of firewhisky and another for Harry, pushing it across

the table towards him. Harry sips it. Then Slughorn rounds on Theo. "And you?"

"I have my own interests," Theo says quietly. Slughorn's face seems to crumple and he looks at Theo with a slightly pleading expression, but there's a glimmer of something in his face Theo doesn't understand. Theo frowns. He feels slightly at sea, as if the floor is tilting underneath them. He has the uncomfortable impression that perhaps he and Harry are holding a different conversation than Slughorn and when he glances at Harry, he thinks Harry feels the same way. He looks a little woozy, and is frowning intensely. Slughorn drains his firewhisky, his hands trembling.

"My Prodigy," Slughorn whispers, still looking at Theo with those pleading, wide eyes. "I do not know what your father might have told you about it, there was ... a betrayal of a nature, I suppose, he may have been hurt by my actions since we were so dear to one another-,"

"My father?" Theo frowns. *What the fuck is in this memory?*

"Fuck this," Harry says abruptly, standing up.

"Potter-Black," Theo says warningly, trying to remind Harry that they're still playing a part, but suddenly, Harry turns and throws up on the rug. "Harry!"

Pretence gone, Theo rushes to his side but Harry retches again, his back trembling.

"What is it?" Theo whips out his wand, quickly running diagnostic spells, wordlessly, for the first time in his life. He would be proud of the accomplishment if he wasn't so bloody worried. *No broken bones, no torn muscles -*

"The fucking whisky -," Harry coughs, throwing up again. "Tasted weird -,"

It is too fast, far too fast, to be the alcohol no matter how thin Harry is, and Harry does at least know what whisky should taste like thanks to Magnus Bane. *What causes such immediate vomiting after ingestion?* The answer is easy. Theo clambers up, shakily scrambling into his robe pocket for the small collection of potion tools he now keeps on his person at all times with a pocket expansion charm: *Harry's headache potion, essence of murtlap, ginger root* - then he finds it, the diagnostic card that Professor Snape developed for poisons, paper made from blending with the fibres of death caps. He remembers his lesson about measuring and detecting death cap toxicity. Theo dips it into the whisky glass and stares, horribly, as it turns darkest black.

"Shit, shit, shit -," Theo fumbles in his pocket again, pulling out a tiny vial of essence of ipecacuanha that he's been carrying around since Hogsmeade, worried of attacks just like this. "Sorry, beloved -,"

He forces it down Harry's throat and Harry coughs, retching and vomiting again, seemingly endless, - as Theo chants to himself: *don't die, don't die, don't die* - but when it is finished, his cheeks have not lost pallor and his pulse is high and rapid. Theo can hear Snape's voice inside his head: *signs of deadly poisoning are loss of colour, sluggish pulse, shallow breathing*. Theo lets out a sigh of relief.

“You’re not dying.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m *not*? I feel like I am,” Harry groans, flopping sideways. He’s looked better, it’s true, but Theo feels like he could rejoice over his sweaty, flushed pallor and fast, deep breathing. Harry rolls onto his side, his eyes twisting back towards the table. “Shit, is *he* dying?”

Theo turns. Slughorn is slumped in his chair, his face grey, his breathing shallow.

“Fuck,” Theo staggers forward, pressing his fingers against the man’s jugular. “He’s much worse than you, he drank so much more -,”

Theo can tell that since Slughorn has not vomited already, his body is not rejecting the poison like Harry’s, it’s metabolising it. Theo’s hands are shaking and he can’t think, he can’t *think* of anything even as the man’s desperate, watery eyes fix upon him as he gargles desperately.

“The book ...” Harry gasps, still lying on the floor. “Shove a bezoar ...”

“Yes!” Theo watches as Slughorn croaks desperately in assent, his eyes rolling towards the cabinet. Theo stumbles to it, throwing open drawers until he finds it. He grabs the blackish stone and forces it between Slughorn’s lips, massaging his throat until it goes down and the man splutters, his pallor beginning to return but his pulse is still horribly slow. “He probably needs the hospital wing.”

“Get the memory first,” Harry says, wincing as he pulls himself into a seated position. “You saved his life. He fucking owes you.”

“My, my, Harry,” Slughorn coughs in between heavy gasps but Theo notices his eyes are still unclouded. *He’s still aware.* “I believe your Black is showing. Yet one wonders why you are not likewise afflicted.”

“Harry’s on other potions,” Theo says, without thinking, because he’s been trying to puzzle it out since Harry took the same potion but promptly vomited rather than nearly suffered heart failure. *It can only be the unique ingredients in his nightly potions, it must be -* Slughorn’s little eyes narrow.

“You *are* friends,” he mutters.

“It’s none of your business,” Harry groans as he pulls himself up to seated, his curls sticking sweatily to his brow. “Give him the memory.”

“Theodore, Theodore,” Slughorn’s clumsy hands find his. “Trust me, my boy, my dear Prodigy, I shall never steer you wrong - you do not want to a Potter *or* a Black to see it, it will only get back to Dumbledore and I would carry Apollonius’ secrets to my grave. Whatever this boy has promised you, it is no surety against the future -,”

“Alright, enough,” Harry grunts, pulling himself to his feet and shooting his wand down into its holster. “If you won’t give it to us I’ll just go in and get it.”

“No, Harry,” Theo quickly pushes his wand arm down. He cannot risk Harry showing his true power. He turns to look at Slughorn. “Show it to me. Allow me into your mind. I will decide if I share it with anyone else.”

“It’s either that or I take it from you,” Harry says flatly. “And I can.”

“Then one wonders why you came with wine at all, Potter-Black,” Slughorn wheezes. “Or was it *your beloved’s* idea?”

“What?” Theo whispers, pulling his hands away. He doesn’t understand, his mind is spinning, but he when he looks at Harry, he realises he’s made a terrible mistake. *Sorry, beloved*, that was what he said when he gave Harry the emetic. He takes a shuddering breath: *shit*. Harry closes his eyes and then opens them. He doesn’t look angry. Instead, he just gives Slughorn a long stare.

“You’re the one who’s lying about what you told Voldemort,” Harry says flatly and Slughorn flinches visibly. “Give us the memory or I will take it from you.”

Harry’s lesson with the goblin King has done something. There is no hint of compulsion in Harry’s voice at all, only the certainty of his own convictions. Theo believes his words. Looking at Slughorn’s laboured breathing and steady assessment of Harry, he believes them too.

“I’ll give it to Theodore,” Slughorn says, turning to Theo with vicious eyes. “He is the only one and I think, probably, that once he has seen it,” Slughorn gives Harry a truly distrustful look. “He will *never* give it to you, Potter-Black.”

You know nothing about me, Theo thinks distantly but he nods and raises his wand. He’s been practicing the legilimency charm for months and months, ever since Narcissa told him that understanding it will only improve his mind shield. He can see something shifting inside Slughorn’s eyes. He realises Narcissa was right. Slughorn is not only a proficient legilimens, he is an occlumens too. He is dropping his shields to allow Theo in. Theo takes a deep breath.

“*Legilimens!*”

Slughorn is sitting, resplendent, amongst a group of Hogwarts students. Theo picks out Tom Riddle, dark, handsome, pale faced but then, with an internal gasp, sees Apollonius. It’s strange, Theo thinks, to see a version of himself, what he would look like if all traces of his mother were erased. If he didn’t have her leaner face and her softer eyes. Apollonius is seated next to Slughorn but has that same, guarded expression that Theo knew throughout his whole childhood. *Was he always this way?*

“Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?” Riddle asks.

“Tom, my dearest Prodigy, if I knew I couldn’t tell you,” Slughorn winks at Riddle. Theo feels his stomach plummet. He knew from Harry that the Potions Master recycled nicknames but it’s different to see it happen and to learn the providence of his nickname. *The Dark Lord. Apollonius would have been so proud.* “You always have a way, Prodigy, an uncanny ability to know things that you shouldn’t. I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well, you know I take care of all my boys.” Theo watches as Slughorn pats Apollonius on the arm. From everything Slughorn has said about how friendly they were, he’s surprised to see a tight, guarded smile on Apollonius’ face. Theo knows that smile. It means Apollonius wants to kill somebody.

“Well, I’m not a Nott,” Riddle says, smirking at Apollonius whose smile becomes more natural, just for a second. “I don’t have a lordship for you to help progress, nor the right background.”

Theo sees the boys around Riddle smirk. He imagines that Riddle has already told them that he’s the Heir of Slytherin. Apollonius is already wearing his Lordship ring. Theo knows that his grandfather died young. It’s uncomfortable, suddenly, to realise it. *He was Lord Nott Apparent around the same age that I am.*

“Nonsense, couldn’t be plainer, you come from good, Wizarding stock.” Slughorn says, swallowing down crystallised pineapple. “Probably pureblood. You’ll go far, my Prodigy.”

“Thank you, sir.”

A clock chimes and Slughorn stands, clapping a hand on Apollonius’ shoulder. Apollonius’ shoulders are as tense as they day they were when Theo’s mother died. He doesn’t understand why.

“You better get going, boys, or we’ll all be in trouble!” Slughorn says, rising to his feet and smiling around at them all. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Nott, for remedial Potions?”

“Yes sir,” Apollonius’ voice is cool. He doesn’t look back as he leaves the room and Theo finds himself watching the door, wondering if his young father will return. He does not. Riddle lingers and Slughorn turns, seeming to be surprised to see him there. “How can I help you, Tom?”

“Sir, I wanted to ask you something,” Tom frowns.

“It couldn’t wait?”

“I have a project I’m working on, for Defence Against the Dark Arts ... it’s about horcruxes.”

Theo doesn’t know the word but Slughorn does. He sips his brandy and looks at Riddle steadily, all affability vanished. Theo recognises this version of Slughorn. This is the man

who has looked at Harry with such a hard, distrustful gaze all evening. Riddle presses on. "I came across the term reading and I didn't understand it."

"I am sure that is the way the Headmaster wants it to be," Slughorn says lightly.

"An overview, sir?" Riddle asks. Theo can sense the eagerness in his tone. Slughorn gives him a steady look.

"I'm surprised, Tom, that you came to me," Slughorn says. "Surely Professor Dumbledore would be a better fit."

"Well, sir, Nott tells me how ... helpful you are to him," Riddle says slowly. "In remedial Potions. For all these years. I suppose I am a little jealous."

Theo swallows hard. He has a terrible sensation inside, of wanting to run away but also feeling as if he is stuck in place, desperate to hear more.

"Jealous, Tom?" Slughorn's tone is sharp. "What is there to be jealous of? You are my Prodigy, that Mr Nott has to endure remedial potions with my old self -,"

"Well, he is ... special to you, sir." Riddle's voice is hesitant, reflective, but Theo can see the shine of a hunting cat in his eyes. Slughorn stiffens.

"I don't know what Mr Nott has mentioned -,"

"I would never tell anyone, sir," Riddle says quickly, though anyone can see that it's a lie. *Unless it suits you*, Theo thinks dazedly.

"Well. Thank you, Prodigy," Slughorn says but his eyes are also sharp. "You are kind to your friend."

"It's not for him, sir," Riddle steps forward, eyes eager. "It's for me."

Theo understands. Riddle doesn't care about Apollonius. He only cares about what he wants. *He probably held it over Apollonius for the rest of his life*, Theo realises, with a stab of unusual pain. *If Apollonius was fool enough to trust him.*

"For you?" Slughorn repeats.

"I trust you, sir," Riddle is within arms grasp of Slughorn but moves no closer. Theo appreciates, distantly, the cleverness of that. *Keep the temptation just out of reach*. "Nott doesn't need you, sir, he has a Lordship, I *need* someone like you in my corner, I want to improve my fortunes and ..." Riddle deliberately looks Slughorn up and down. Theo nauseously realises he is looking at the future Dark Lord attempting to look seductive. His eyes are cold and passionless and yet, Theo knows Slughorn is believing it. "I'll do anything, sir. It's like you said, sir, I want to rise politically, I want to make you proud. I want to be special."

Theo watches a fervent glow begin in Riddle's eyes. Theo doesn't believe Riddle cares about Slughorn. He does believe that Riddle, more than anything, wants to be special.

“Is that so?” Slughorn’s voice is gruff.

“I would like my questions answered,” Riddle says softly. “I’d like to learn from a Master.”

Turn him away, Theo finds himself thinking desperately at Slughorn. *He’s a child, he’s your student, it doesn’t matter how tempting he is or how manipulative, turn him away.* Theo doesn’t want to see it happen to the future Dark Lord. *Because if it happens to him, then it definitely happened to Apollonius.*

“Well then,” Slughorn sips his brandy and waves his wand. A door opens at the back of his office. “Will you come through to my quarters, Tom? Perhaps we can answer some of your questions.”

There is no flicker of regret or fear in young Riddle’s eyes but Theo sees it. The clenching and releasing of his fists. The straightening of his back. Theo’s stomach lurches because he recognises that behaviour, he knows it intimately. It is how Harry looks before he places himself in a dangerous situation: Expectant, wary, powerful, and resigned. Theo believes that Riddle knew what Slughorn was doing with Apollonius, that he was trying to blackmail him into giving him the answers he needed and the attention he wanted. Theo swallows back nausea. Riddle may be the next Dark Lord in the making, he may be a manipulative young man, but Theo can only see Slughorn’s age and strength, his brutal *manliness* in front of this slight, horribly young boy. He wants to scream out, to tell Riddle not to do it, but Theo already knows how this ends.

“It would be my honour, sir,” Riddle says, with a dazzling false smile. Slughorn’s own face collapses into joy. Stupid, foolish joy of believing a lie he so desperately wants to believe; that he is not forcing this sixteen year old wizard to do anything. That he, the teacher, the mentor, the *man* is being hopelessly seduced by a boy.

“Come then, prodigy.”

Theo watches, breath held, as Slughorn gestures Tom Riddle through to his quarters, placing a hand on the small of Riddle’s back as he guides him through. He sees, right then, the flinch in Riddle’s shoulders and Theo’s stomach rolls with complete disgust. He has seen enough.

He pulls himself out of Slughorn’s memory, gasping heavily. He stares down at the old man, who has tears chasing down his cheeks. Theo ignites his mind shield without even thinking about it, pushing the raging nundu of his anger behind the flaming wall, keeping it pacing and growling and away from his rational mind. *Get the memory.* He grabs Slughorn’s hand.

“Give it to me,” Theo says coldly. “And the conversation you gave him. After.”

Slughorn looks tremulously up at him and puts his wand to his temple, withdrawing it slowly. The silver thread of it stretches out and suddenly Harry is there, by his side, with the empty bottle of wine, ready for Slughorn to drop the memory into it.

“I warned you,” Slughorn’s voice trembles as he sniffs at Theo. “He was precious to me. I kept his secret this long.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Theo says, blandly. Slughorn winces. Theo doesn’t care if he thinks he is cruel. *He abused Apollonius and Tom Riddle. I am not the cruel one here.* “You have a pensieve?”

Slughorn sighs heavily and then waves his wand towards the lowest drawer of the cabinet. Theo nods and, in one fluid movement, turns his wand on Slughorn.

“*Stupefy!*”

Slughorn slumps in the chair and Theo turns to Harry. He realises Harry has said nothing but is standing close, rubbing his hand up and down Theo’s back. He realises the gentle warmth of the press of the bond, thrumming softly in his centre, is keeping him upright. Theo takes a steadying breath.

“Watch it,” Theo jerks his head towards the pensieve. “Then take it to Dumbledore.”

Harry doesn’t even question him and Theo could not be more grateful. He walks over to the bottom drawer of the cabinet and pulls out the pensieve, dropping the memory inside it and disappearing. Theo slumps. He sits on the floor and presses his forehead to his knees and finds his mind shield. The nundu inside his mind stops pacing and stares at him, growling to be set free. The mind shield trembles and Theo isn’t sure, today, what will happen if he lets the rage free. Narcissa’s words float back to him: *You, however, are a Son of War. Your ancestors threw rune stones for Agroboda. I believe you are more than capable of the faith that is necessary.* Theo breathes deeply and sinks down into the place inside him where he meditates upon the ancient words of the Norse texts, where he feels the roots of Yggdrasil digging deep into his soul. *When dooms to give/ each day they ride/ To the ash-tree Yggdrasil.* As Theo’s breath softens and the nundu of his rage lies down, grumbling quietly, a long-forgotten memory soars back to him, chased by magic.

“*Who taught you Potions?*” Theo asks his mother as they brew quietly in the corner of her medicine shed. *Theo is six years old and still soft and unblemished. Apollonius will not begin training him for two whole years.*

“*There was a teacher at school,*” Mother says, quietly stripping herbs as Theo stands on his stool to stir the cauldron. “*He was proficient but he did not help me.*”

“*Why?*”

“*Because he didn’t like me.*”

“*Why?*” Theo frowns. *The idea that anyone would not love Mother was unbelievable.*

“*Because he was not a kind man.*”

They both turn to see Father standing in the doorway of the medicine shed. He is wearing his leather arm braces. Theo knows he must have been sparring and feels a thrill of excitement that one day, he will learn to be a warrior like Father.

“Not like your father,” Mother says softly. “Who saw my potential when no one else did.”

“Not kind like your mother, who was so warm or patient with me when everyone else had given up,” Father smiles so gently, so fondly at Mother and Theo feels safe. Father always keeps them safe.

“Will he teach me when I go to school?” Theo asks, taking the herbs from his mother and adding them slowly.

“No, Theodore,” Father’s face is suddenly shadowed with a pain that Theo doesn’t understand. “If I have my way, you will never make the acquaintance of that monster.”

“Theo? Theo?”

Theo looks up and feels a dampness on his cheeks. Harry is kneeling in front of him, running his hands through Theo’s hair, the gentle press of the bond waking him back up from his memories.

“Did you watch it?” Theo gasps, rubbing his cheeks with the back of his hands.

“Did you?” Harry asks quietly. “All of it?”

“No, just until ...” Theo takes a deep breath. “He did it then? He ... and Riddle?”

“Yes,” Harry’s furious green eyes fix on Slughorn. “He shagged him.”

Theo puts his head in his hands, feeling trembling running through him that he barely understands. Harry’s hands are warm, full of magic, pulsing little sparks through his shirt as they rub his arms. It’s intensely comforting.

“I remembered a time with my mother and Apollonius back when - when I still called him ... Father,” Theo gulps, unable to stop the shaking. Facts are chasing around his head, horrible and unstoppable: *Everyone said Apollonius was strange, waiting so long to marry. Everyone said he never courted, even at Hogwarts. Everyone said he was disconnected.* “I think this was the reason that he didn’t marry until he met mother. I think he was ...”

Damaged.

“Yeah,” Harry murmurs. Of course, Harry heard the word Theo couldn’t say out loud.

“And he still went back to him,” Theo’s voice breaks desperately on the words. “He went *back* to Riddle when he called, even after mother’s death, even after Riddle probably held what Slughorn did to him over him all those years, he went *back* -,”

“Theo,” Harry brushes Theo’s tears away with his thumbs. His green eyes are fearfully bright, dangerously bright. “It’s okay to still be mad at him and to feel sorry for him too, it’s okay to ... to hate what he became and ... feel bad for who he was when he was our age.”

Theo looks into Harry’s taut face. He knows without asking that this is what Harry feels about Riddle. How could he not? How could a boy like Harry, who is so familiar with being used by people, not look at Slughorn taking advantage of Riddle’s manipulations and feel fury? Harry glares at Slughorn’s prone form, his skin prickling with lightning. Theo wonders how much self-control it is taking to hold it all inside.

“I’m going to get him fired,” Harry’s voice is sharp as diamonds.

“Harry -,”

“Theo,” Harry’s green eyes meet his own, as bright as the killing curse. “He calls you *Prodigy*. He looks at you like - like -,”

Theo’s stomach churns brutally. He remembers Slughorn’s words at the Halloween party last month: *You’re just like your father, aren’t you? He was a gentleman too, a favourite of mine, certainly!*

“I’ll obliviate him and take him to the hospital wing,” Theo says, his voice becoming more steady. “He’ll still need treatment for the poisoning.”

“Okay. Make it a good spell,” Harry says bleakly. “He can’t remember, y’know, about us.”

Tonight is definitely the night for testing all of the charms Theo has been practicing for the last year. *Professor Flitwick would be so pleased.*

“It’s okay, I know how to do it,” Theo says. “Go to Dumbledore.”

“Yeah.” Harry stands up, glaring at Slughorn. His eyes fix on Theo with a kind of fervour that feels like absolute devotion. It’s crushing and wonderful, the bond filling him with warmth. *With safety.* “I’m going to fix this. I promise.”

Theo believes him.

“I love you,” he says simply. Harry nods fiercely. He pulls the memory back out of the pensieve with his wand and drops it back into the wine bottle. Theo watches him stride out of the room, full of purpose, a slight dusting of lighting sparks trailing in his wake. Theo pulls himself wearily up to his feet. He positions himself in front of Slughorn’s prone form and, for a brief second, imagines slicing his knife across his throat and anointing his wrists with the ceremonial runes. *For Apollonius.* It would be justice, of a sort. Theo levels his wand at Slughorn’s face.

“*Ennervatae,*” he whispers and then, as soon as those rheumy eyes open: “*Obliviate.*”

Theo knows the theory of the memory charm. He knows how to focus fiercely on the moments he wants obliterated and visualise them being hidden. He thinks of the memories he wants forgotten, everything from when Theo and Harry arrived at the door but then, when it

comes to the moment Theo said the word 'beloved' he intensifies his focus. He knows that using a memory spell with too much intensity can result in permanent brain malfunction, like Professor Lockhart, but Theo doesn't care. Slughorn will never remember this conversation and if he has to spend the rest of his life in St Mungo's because of it, Theo will happily shoulder that burden. When the charm is finished, Theo is swaying, barely able to breathe from the ferocity of it. Slughorn coughs, his body no doubt fighting between ingesting poison and the bezoar.

"Prodigy," Theo winces to hear that word again on this man's lips. "Why are you here? How did you get in?"

Theo is relieved it has worked and also a little disappointed that he still seems so compositus.

"I came to see you, sir, I found you like this. I think you were poisoned." Theo offers him a hand to pull him to his feet, trying not to flinch at the clamminess and the thought of being touched by this man. "I gave you a bezoar but we should go to the hospital wing, just to check."

"Oh. Thank you, Prodigy," Slughorn staggers to his feet. "You are just like your father, aren't you?"

Theo smiles tensely. He says nothing and lets Slughorn lean against him as they walk to the hospital wing. *I could have killed him*, Theo thinks with each step. Distantly, he focuses on the thrum of the bond inside him and is surprised when he feels the same thought drifting distantly back to him, like a faint radio tuning in and out. Somewhere in the castle, Harry is feeling murderous. *Maybe I should have*, Theo thinks bleakly. *Before Harry does*.

I definitely should have killed him, if I can't get him fired I'm going straight back down there and I'm going to get Sahara to bite him, fucking teaching kids and doing that -

Harry flings open the door to Dumbledore's study with a bang, the magic in his hand causing the metal doorknob to nearly explode with sparks when it meets the stone wall. Harry does care. He can still feel Theo's pain, though it's much more distant now than it was after he had seen the memory, and it's enough to make his breath rapid and shallow as he glares at the Headmaster in his dressing gown.

"Harry," Dumbledore is standing by the fireplace, staring into the flames. "What can I do for you? I have just heard from Poppy that Horace is in the hospital wing?"

"Your memory," Harry holds out the wine bottle with a trembling hand. The Black magic has frosted the surface. "Watch it."

Dumbledore takes it with an impassive expression, examines the ice on the surface.

“You are angry,” he says softly. He gestures over to the pensieve. “Will you accompany me?”

Harry nods shortly. He has no desire to watch this again but he wants to watch Dumbledore watch it. The man who re-hired Slughorn, who taught alongside him all those years. *Did he know?*

You are angry, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind. You must control your fury.

As Harry pushes his face against the surface of the pensieve for the second time that evening, he doesn't care. He doesn't care that just setting foot in the memory causes it to quake, the edges of it wobbling because he's too full of magic to stop it leaking out of his rune marks, golden sparks in the air.

Slughorn wanted Theo, he wanted him -

Don't think about that, Harry scolds himself. He takes the book of Theo and throws it down into the lake inside his mind, feeling the coldness of the water spread through his blood. *Don't care, don't care, don't care -*

Instead, Harry focuses on Dumbledore. He watches his aged face as Slughorn entertains, as Tom makes his play for more power, as the truth of what must have been happening to Apollonius Nott is revealed. Dumbledore's face does not move. Then Tom is walking through to the bedroom and the memory shifts, shuffles through time, and Slughorn is sitting on the edge of a bed, buttoning his shirt over his blonde-haired chest. Harry barely hears the conversation between them, he is too busy looking at the the way Slughorn's shirt is long and covers his hairy, naked thighs. Horribly, it reminds Harry of Vernon. *Vernon's weight as he knocks Harry into the cupboard, unstoppable, impossible to fight back against.*

“A horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul ...you split your soul you see, then, even if the body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die ...it is done through an act of evil, by committing murder, wrenching the soul apart, cursing yourself and encasing the soul piece somehow ...”

Slughorn's words wash over Harry as he stares at Tom Riddle's naked back, sees the lash marks that healed there long ago and thinks of his own back. *Piers and Dudley hold him down, the barbed wire bites into his skin.* He looks at Dumbledore, he hopes to see regret or outrage there, but all he finds is sharp, intense attention and Harry realises something: *What Slughorn's saying matters more to him than what Slughorn did.*

“Would one horcrux be much use?” Riddle asks. Harry notices how he doesn't look at Slughorn as he speak. Those eyes are cold, as cold as they were in the Chamber of Secrets. “Seven is the most powerful magical number -,”

Not seven, something growls within Harry. He thinks it might be the Grim but he doesn't care because Slughorn is dismissing Riddle, telling him off for talking about it, telling him its a banned subject at Hogwarts and then reaching for Tom again and Tom, Harry knows that look, Tom is staring at the clock behind Slughorn's head and letting it happen.

(The blood quill cuts into Harry's skin and he disappears inside his head, one, two three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive ...)

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore says. "I think we have seen enough."

Dumbledore pulls his arm and they land in the office. Harry sits heavily in the chair in front of the desk and glares up at Dumbledore.

"Fire him," Harry snaps.

"Horace?" Dumbledore stands over the pensieve, stirring the contents with his wand.

"Yes."

"Harry -," Dumbledore sighs.

"No," Harry clenches his hands into fists and tries to think of the lake inside his mind, of the trapdoor in his library, but for the first time ever, there is a book banging back against it, desperate to climb out of the water. *He calls Theo Prodigy. He touches his arm all the time. He looks at him how he looked at Riddle.* "He was - they were in - he *slept* with a student -,"

"Tom has always been able to manipulate people to get what he wants, Harry, you saw how he was with Hezibah -,"

"Don't blame HIM!" Harry bellows. All of the glass in the office explodes. "He was SIXTEEN!"

"Harry." Dumbledore's voice is soft. "He may have been in sixth year but I know Tom was actually seventeen at the time. He was a legal adult and had already killed his own father."

"SO?" Harry explodes, finding himself on his feet without standing. *Think*, Severus' voice seems to chant in his head. *Think!* But Harry can't think. He's made of magic and rage and he can't stop. "I've killed *tons* of people and I'm YOUNGER than he was! Slughorn USED him!"

"I understand your sadness, Harry, but Tom was a master manipulator, even at that age." Dumbledore folds his arms in his robes, closing his eyes. "You could see Horace's reticence -,"

"Was he compelled?" Harry says furiously. "Was he under the imperius curse? Did Tom have him at wandpoint?"

"Tom Riddle does not need a wand to be threatening, Harry. You know that better than anyone."

Harry stares at him for a long second because he does know, of course he knows, he's heard Tom's threats in his head, felt terrified of him from just a letter or a conversation or words written in a diary and Tom Riddle became Voldemort but something inside Harry is screeching and won't be silenced. *Justice*, the Black Raven caws. *There must be justice.*

“No, this - this isn’t right, whoever Tom was that doesn’t matter, Slughorn was his *teacher* it’s - it’s - wrong.” Harry stares at Dumbledore desperately. *Please don’t do this to me.* “I mean, you have to see that, surely? That it’s wrong?”

Harry holds his breath. He is not sure what he’ll do if Dumbledore tells him this behaviour is fine, that it’s normal, that Slughorn’s in the right. *Oh you know boys, Petunia trills in his mind. They knock one another around but it’s all in jest! Just boys being boys.*

“I do,” Dumbledore says quietly. Harry almost deflates with relief.

“Then *how* could you let him do this to him?” He stares at Dumbledore desperately.

“I did not know. Horace has always kept part of himself hidden from me,” Dumbledore face is full of sadness. Harry is actually a little bit amazed at how relieved he is to hear this: *he didn’t know. I wasn’t utterly fucking stupid to trust him.* “It is no doubt why Horace has concealed this memory from me for so long.”

“Then *why*?” Harry croaks out. *Why don’t you care what happened?*

“Because of the question Tom asked.” Dumbledore says steadily. “It is the answer to everything.”

“The ... hor-things?”

“Horcruxes, yes. They are the key, Harry, to understanding Voldemort, to understanding how to defeat him and how to ensure your survival,” Dumbledore speaks slowly and deliberately, his eyes fixed on Harry’s face. Harry can feel it’s important, almost as if Dumbledore’s trying to drill it into his mind and maybe he is, but Harry can’t stop this feeling inside. *He wants Theo. He took Tom. He had Apollonius. It’s wrong, it’s so fucking wrong.*

“And that’s more important than the fact that your *old friend* raped a seventeen year old?” Harry says harshly. Dumbledore sucks in a sharp breath and looks into the fire, his blue eyes full of orange flames.

“We have no notion of Tom’s consent. He certainly did not exhibit any sign of prohibition.” Dumbledore’s voice is bland. It makes Harry flinch inside. Remus’ words rush back to him: *Consent in an affirmative process, not a restrictive one.*

“Are you *kidding*?” Harry chokes out. “We - we don’t *need* to know that! How would he have said *no*? He’s a *teacher*!”

“Harry, in any other circumstances -,”

“In any other circumstances?” Harry yells. “He - he was ... *doing stuff* with Apollonius Nott!”

“We don’t have evidence of that,” Dumbledore says calmly. “In fact, it is entirely possible that Tom created a situation, perhaps even manipulated young Mr Nott at the time, so that he could entirely use Horace to his advantage -,”

“Jesus Christ, you think Tom *set Apollonius up* with Slughorn so he could get what he wanted?” Harry stares at Dumbledore. A strange question pops into his head: *does he even care about the truth?*

Horribly, a sly voice answers.

He only cares about his own truth, little weapon.

Fuck off, Tom.

Harry bites furiously down on his lip and closes his eyes, tasting blood as he forces himself to freeze his mindscape. To freeze out Tom. Dumbledore seems to take his silence and stillness for some kind of assent because he carries on speaking in a softer tone.

“Tom was and always has been different, Harry,” he says soberly. “He was conceived under a love potion, he does not love, or heart bond, it is possible that for him, acts that others conceive of as acts of love are just ... acts.”

Harry thinks of Apollonius’ stiff body language, his eyes that held murder and fury. Harry thinks of Tom’s blank gaze. Harry thinks of Slughorn calling Theo *Prodigy* and touching his arm.

Not good enough, a thousand voices inside Harry scream.

Harry takes a trembling breath and unclenches his fists. The Black magic pours out of his diamond and into his blood. When he opens his eyes, he can see Dumbledore is watching him warily. Harry can feel that he’s glowing, illuminated by the Black magic which always, *always* seeks justice.

“So the answer to my question is yes,” Harry’s voice is harsh. “It does mean more to you than the fact that one of your teachers, someone you *employed*, someone you are *friends with*, raped a student in your fucking school.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore unfolds his arms and Harry wonders, suddenly, if he’s going to reach for his wand. “Horace’s behaviour was terrible and yes, Tom undoubtedly had a cruel and terrible childhood. Awful things happened to him and this may have been one of them, but that does not mean that he is excused from -,”

“Do you think I’m STUPID?” Harry bellows. “That I’m going to think ‘oh, poor sad Tom, he had a shit time so *of course* it’s okay that he KILLED MY FAMILY AND BOYFRIEND?’”

His right hand is heavy with the weight of the Prince ring and the desire to open the nothing-place and launch Dumbledore into it is so enticing.

Think, farzandam.

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice is guarded and his wand is in his hand. Harry knows, *even now*, Dumbledore’s looking for Tom in his eyes and if possible, that makes Harry even angrier. An ice storm swells around his feet, ruffling his hair and catching snow in his eyebrows but Harry doesn’t care. Dumbledore might curse him, might plunder his mind with legilimency

but Harry can't pull his anger back into himself. There is too much inside him (*Dudley, Petunia, Vernon, Tom, Bellatrix, Draco*) and he can't stop the magic it brings.

You need to hold the magic inside you, Sahara whispers.

Then fucking help me!

Sahara appears invisibly around his neck and plunges her fangs into his throat. Harry chokes on gratitude. He breathes easier and the snow dissipates slightly, the sharpness of Sahara's fangs distracting him slightly from the lightning of the Slytherin magic that burns to escape and the heaviness of the Prince ring that longs to open dimensions.

"This anger isn't Tom's," Harry says, his voice trembling violently as he looks into Dumbledore's guarded face. "This isn't *about* Tom at all, not really, I'm angry because you're employing an - an -, " *Abuser* - even now, Harry cannot say the word, hating it more than ever. "Someone who *sleeps* with their students!"

"Slept with," Dumbledore corrects. "Tom Riddle. Once."

Harry screams. The windows burst with white light and snow and the fire whips out. Sahara drinks his blood but Harry can barely feel it. In his mind's eye, he sees the raven of the Black magic, imagines it tearing out eyes and splitting souls with ice. Then he remembers Tom's voice from when he was possessed at the Ministry, the question that never, ever leaves him: *What would be justice, Harry?*

Not this.

"I can't believe it, I can't believe you but Jesus Christ on a *broom*, what did I fucking expect? Why don't I learn?" Harry's laughing, uncontrollably, bent at the waist because it's suddenly and horrible, too bloody funny. *What did I expect from a man who stopped loving me so fucking abruptly?*

"I merely stated the facts," Dumbledore says quietly.

"The facts! Oh Jesus, you are honestly so fucking blind," Harry laughs brutally. "You really think it was only once?"

Dumbledore honestly looks baffled and Harry shakes his head.

"That's what people said," Harry feels like broken glass is being pulled out of his throat but he speaks anyway. "If they saw a bruise. A man like Vernon, a man people respect, surely if something bad happened, it could only be *once*."

Harry can feel tears starting in the corner of his eyes. *I will not cry in front of Dumbledore. Never again.*

So instead, he lets the parseltongue slip from his lips:

"None of us had a fucking chance, no one notices, no one cares, no one says anything, there's no fucking justice to be had in this fucking shit show -, "

“*You will be justice,*” Sahara hisses back, invisibly licking at the blood on his neck.

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice is dangerously quiet. “Can you speak English and look me in the eyes?”

Harry catches a glance of himself in the cracked mirror behind the desk. His eyes are completely black. He doesn’t care. *Let Dumbledore figure that one out.* He stands up straight and imagines the Black Prince, tall and proud, his ravens resting on his shoulders on an icy plane, his whole being full of a magic that screams, eternally, for justice. He stares into Dumbledore’s eyes, unafraid that there is nothing to be seen behind the inky veil of the Black magic.

“You’re a fool,” Harry says flatly. “It’s *never* once.”

There’s something unreadable in those blue irises, something that might look like surprise in anyone else but in Dumbledore, just looks like a man starting to change direction. Harry realises he doesn’t care. He snorts and shakes his head and turns to leave.

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice is quiet. “We must talk about the horcruxes.”

Harry holds onto the doorknob. Maybe it’s having spent so long being the centre of Dumbledore’s plans, of spending so long with him thinking about what Voldemort might do next but Harry can already see the architecture of this one. Of course Tom would split his soul into seven. Of course Dumbledore would want to hunt them.

“You want to find them,” Harry says. “Destroy them. I don’t know what that’s got to do with me.”

“Because you have already destroyed one,” Dumbledore says softly. Harry closes his eye softly. *An object that belonged to Tom.* It’s obvious.

“The diary,” Harry nods to himself, remembering the shriek of Tom’s shade as it died. *I killed part of Tom’s soul. Good.*

“I destroyed another,” Dumbledore adds. “The ring.”

He nods to Harry’s right hand where the Peverell ring is hidden. Distantly, Harry remembers how Marvolo Gaunt wore a ring. He hadn’t recognised it at the time, but it makes sense. Something nags at Harry’s memory. He remembers that horrible night with the legilimency and Severus and the Slytherin magic and the crown that sung of death. *Like Sahara said my basilisk fang did.* The fang covered in the remains of the diary.

“I think I did one,” Harry rubs his forehead.

“Oh?” Dumbledore leans forward. Harry’s a little unnerved by the intensity and victory in his gaze.

“This crown thing in the Room of Requirement.”

“Ah. I suppose it could have been Ravenclaw’s diadem ...” Dumbledore nods. Harry’s confused by the slight disappointment in his eyes. “Yes, that is helpful but we cannot stop.”

Three soul-bits already, Harry thinks dazedly, *Can’t be that bad*. He also can’t find it within himself to give a damn about any of it.

“It is of vital importance, Harry,” Dumbledore urges. “Tom Riddle must be stopped.”

Harry looks at Dumbledore, standing in the middle of the room which is now a chaos of broken glass and destruction thanks to Harry. He knows he’ll be able to fix it in a minute and it will look like Harry was never there. *Some things can’t be fixed with magic*, Harry thinks tiredly.

“You know, I thought something, back when you came to Grimmauld Place the summer before last,” Harry says abruptly. “No one is just bad or good, no one is anything until some adult comes along and either loves them or hurts them.”

“That’s very insightful, Harry.”

“Yeah, it is,” Harry stares at him. “Do you ever think about all the ways you hurt people?”

Dumbledore’s face crumples.

“Always,” he whispers. Harry doesn’t know why, but he can’t stop himself from believing him. Harry nods.

“I said I’d help you get rid of Tom because I want my people to get out of this alive, so I’ll help you with the horcrux things,” Harry opens the door slowly and pauses, letting fury and magic fill his voice for a minute because speaking, tremblingly, onto the tense air. “But if Slughorn keeps his job, if you *let* him work here and protect him, if *this* is the world we’re fighting for, then what’s the *fucking point*?”

Harry doesn’t give him a chance to answer. He lifts his wand and points at the pensieve, hissing “*Accio memory!*” and pulls one of his headache potions out from his pocket, empties it and pushes the memory inside with the tip of his wand.

“Harry, don’t -,” Dumbledore calls but Harry doesn’t care. He shoves the stolen memory into his pocket and turns tail to flee. He runs down the stairs and headlong into the wall, not even waiting to change or transform himself, knowing that he has enough magic inside him and enough magical will that he can pull himself apart in an instant with the Hogwarts magic. It’s a relief, really, to drift in the in-between space, to think about how it would feel if he never reshaped his and Sahara’s forms, but one thought holds him together. *Justice*. He goes to the one person he thinks might get it for him and reforms himself, squarely, in front of Severus Snape as he brews in his office.

“Harrison,” Severus looks exhausted. “What’s the matter?”

“I need you to take back the Potions job,” Harry blurts out. He slams the vial of memory down on the table between them. *I will get some kind of justice for this, whatever the cost.*

Chapter End Notes

If you or someone you love has experienced this kind of abuse in a relationship, whether from a partner, a family member, a teacher, a lecturer, a friend, whoever it was, I want you to know you are not alone. You are seen. You are valued. Maybe today you need to hear that bad things really did happen to you and your experience was real. Your feelings are real. I see you. I hear you.

Take it from one survivor to another. We make like the House of Prince. We survive. <3

An Ultimatum

Chapter Notes

Slight change to update schedule this week. Chapter today and no chapter tomorrow. Next chapter will be Tuesday the 21st.

This story is about Trauma in every direction. Play CLOSE attention to the tags. For this chapter, particularly references to past child abuse and past sexual abuse of a minor and homophobic language.

This time, Severus helps Harry process.
Next time, Theo gets caught up in Slytherin politics.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Severus has spent the evening giving a report to the Dark Lord. His knees are, as usual, wrecked from the process but the Dark Lord seems suitably disappointed with Harrison's lack of demonstration of the raven magic. Severus expected to spend the whole night brewing for the Dark Lord, who once again, is obsessed with making Lestrangle walk. So Severus has thrown back some pain potions and is trying to ignore the longing deep in his chest to lie down in bed, preferably next to his wolf. But instead of his predictable night of tedium, he is faced with his son, practically levitating with magic, his usually bright green eyes dark with the power of the raven magic and his hands trembling.

"Excuse me?" Severus stares at Harrison.

"Watch it," Harrison commands, eyes jerking down towards the memory. Severus hesitates and then waves his wand to levitate his pensieve from under his desk to on top of it. Severus notices the trail of sparks from Harrison's fingers. Wordlessly, Severus waves his wand and seals the door. He knows it's a futile gesture, Harrison can easily traverse the castle no matter what spells are cast, but it's more for his own peace of mind.

Severus watches the memory. It's definitely odd, seeing the Dark Lord so young and handsome, equally odd seeing Apollonius Nott (who Severus once saw torture someone to death through water-boarding) so quiet and reserved. He is not surprised when he sees what Horace does, instead, it slots something into place inside his memory.

"He's creepy," Regulus says, wrinkling his nose as he leans against Severus in the library. He is helping Severus study for his NEWTS but mostly distracting him with trailing fingers and soft kisses. "He looks at me weird."

“What kind of weird?”

“Like how Crouch looks at me.”

Severus smirks.

“Everyone looks at you like that,” Severus whispers into Regulus’ ear. “Because you’re so fucking beautiful.”

“Not like that,” Regulus rolls his eyes drolly, obviously not denying Severus’ claim. “Sort of ... the way Lord Gaunt looks at Bella.”

Then, after all that, *horcruxes*. Severus’ mind almost reels with it.

Merlin, he thinks, *he’s practically unbeatable*.

But that seems to be a thought for later, because when Severus emerges from the memory Harrison is still standing exactly where he was before, clenching and unclenching his fists. The snake is visible around his neck, two trickles of red blood dripping onto his t-shirt from his throat. The serpent obviously needed to bite him sometime recently to help him control his magic. It is not a good sign.

“Tell me why you have this,” Severus asks.

“Dumbledore asked for it,” Harrison speaks fast. “Because of the hor-thingies -,”

“Horcruxes.” Severus feels a tremor of despair just to hear the word. He’s only ever read about them in one text, a Necromancy book from the Black library that Regulus showed him once. *How does one destroy a horcrux?* Severus feels the urgent need to write to Lupin.

“So Theo and I went and got Slughorn drunk and got it -,” Harrison goes on.

“You did *what?*”

“- And then he was poisoned and I was poisoned and Theo made me sick and used a bezoar on Slughorn and we got the memory and then I took it to Dumbledore and he -,”

“Wait,” Severus holds up a trembling finger. *This damned child*. “You were poisoned?”

Harrison’s eyes seem to catch up with Severus’ words and he winces.

“Yeah,” he swallows heavily. “I still feel kind of sick actually, but I think I threw it all up. Theo says that potions I’m on, they must have made it, I dunno, less bad.”

“It depends entirely on the poison. Come here,” Severus commands. He rifles on his potions bench until he finds a poison litmus parchment and shoves it under Harrison’s chin. “Spit.”

Harrison glares at him but does. Severus stares at it with his heart thumping, but the parchment only turns the faintest drop of grey. Severus breathes a sigh of relief.

“Death cap poison. Mr Nott’s diagnosis was likely correct.” The unusual magical components that have gone into Harrison’s nightly dream potion (*fucking unicorn tears, for Circe’s sake!*) thankfully at least held some of the immediate toxicity at bay. “But you are right, it looks as if you have expelled anything that will be damaging to you, though there is still a mild toxicity in your system,” Severus rifles in his work bench for a particular antidote and hands the plant to Harrison. “Chew.”

“What is it?” Harrison wrinkles his nose. “I don’t want to be sick again.”

“Dried dandelion. It will help cleanse your system,” Severus says. “It will not make you sick but you may need to urinate more quickly than usual.”

“Better than throwing up again,” Harrison mutters, chewing the dried leaves and wincing. Severus gestures to his pensieve. The serpent unravels itself from Harrison’s neck and slides onto Severus’ work bench, wrapping itself in a wide circle around Severus’ cauldron that sits in the quietly dancing flames. Severus hopes this means Harrison has enough control of his magic to bear a conversation.

“You took this to Albus?”

“Uh huh.” The chewing seems to be calming Harrison as he nods and takes deep breaths. “He doesn’t give a piss. I lost it.”

Severus folds his arms and looks at his son warily.

“Define that,” he demands softly. If Harrison lost control of himself entirely, if he revealed his hold on the Slytherin magic, the Peverell magic, (Circe forbend, the Prince magic) or the fact that he is Mage, they could be lost.

“He didn’t see the secrets,” Harrison shakes his head and Severus is proud of his self-control. “I did blast out all his fucking windows though.”

“Language,” Severus leans against his desk, tapping his cauldron with his wand to set it in stasis and thinking that Albus probably deserved it. “Why do you want me to go back to teaching Potions?”

“Because he needs to be fired,” Harrison’s eyes flash but thankfully, are becoming more and more green.

“That is Albus’ remit as headmaster, not mine.”

“Yeah, and he’s not *doing* it,” Harrison says darkly. “And if someone doesn’t do something, then I will.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s put it this way, either you take back to the Potions job and give someone else Defence, or I’m going to the hospital wing and I’m going to kill him,” Harrison’s voice is terrifyingly light. “Your choice.”

Severus stares at his child. This is not how he expected this evening to go. For a minute, he desperately wishes Lupin was here but then realises, this is not a conversation that Lupin can immediately handle. *He was not a teenager murderer, after all. I was.*

“You would kill him?” Severus leans his hands back against the potions bench and eyes Harrison critically. He can tell, immediately, that his lack of outburst has unconsciously calmed Harrison. His shoulders relax even if his eyes continue to be vicious.

“Yeah I would,” Harrison shrugs.

“And you think you could do that?” Severus says lightly.

“Yeah, why not? He’s a *rapist*. ”

“The *Avada Kedavra* is a curse for a reason,” Severus raises an eyebrow. “It takes losing a part of your soul to cast it.”

Tiny chips of yourself, tiny flakes, floating away from your sense of self with every cast. Horribly, Severus remembers Tobias.

“When I killed the obscures it didn’t hurt me,” Harrison’s eyes blaze with an unearthly glow.

“That was part of a soul that was tainted and desperate for release, even I could see it belonged to she who marks the shadowed world -,”

“If you mean Death just say Death, she doesn’t need fancy names,” Harrison rolls his eyes, in absurd demonstration of youthfulness in a far too adult conversation.

“The Obscurus was marked for death, its host was dead already,” Severus continues. “Horace is a living, breathing man, and you are happy to kill him? To take the life from him?”

“Why are you judging me? You’ve killed people,” Harrison snarls.

“I am not and I have killed many people,” Severus inclines his head gently. “Usually in defense of my own life.”

“Always?” Harrison presses.

“Not always,” Severus will not lie to his son about this. “But killing someone out of vengeance is not the same as what you did with the Obscurus, Harrison, it would make you a murderer. That is something I was under the impression you did not want to be.”

Harrison glares at Severus in a way that reminds him, oddly, of Regulus at his most powerful and most enraged, a combination of petulant and unpredictable that was always a bit terrifying.

“Okay, so I won’t kill him.” Severus feels more relieved than he should. “But I will go and get him fired.”

Severus feels a tingle of disquiet. The surety in Harrison’s tone never bodes well.

“How would you do that?” Severus asks quietly. Harrison snorts, rolling those green eyes insolently.

“You can’t be like Dumbledore, you can’t seriously think that it’s only ever been those *two*?” Harrison sneers. “You think if I walk into the hospital wing and close the curtains and do *exactly* what Tom did, say I want to improve my fortunes that I trust him, that I’ll do anything -,”

“Enough!” Severus snaps, his stomach rolling with distaste. *I will not let him do this.* Severus knows his son well enough to know that forbidding a course of action is the absolute last thing he should do. Severus forces himself to speak calmly. “Explain to me why you would do this to yourself.”

“Because someone has to something, he’s a *rapist*,” Harrison glares at him. “He raped Tom and Apollonius, they *deserve* justice -,”

“What justice would you give them? I have seen the Dark Lord rape countless others,” Severus says swiftly. “I watched Apollonius torture and kill countless muggles.”

“It doesn’t matter! They were children when it happened!” Harrison yells. “They were my age! It has to matter!”

“It does matter, and for the children they were, I have pity. Paedophilia can never be excused and must always be punished,” Severus continues calmly. “But you are my child and there is no reality in which I would sacrifice *you*, your innocence, your safety, for that punishment.”

“But someone has to do fucking *something* about all this shit!” Harrison yells. “Someone *has* to care!”

The air tightens. Severus inhales sharply. *There is no one I care for in this life more than you, you fucking teenage terror,* Severus thinks, though he cannot say it.

“I care, and *language*,” Severus hands Harrison a glass of water from his bench. “Drink. Take deep breaths.”

Harrison does, gulping the water, his eyes fiery. Severus realises they have reached a conundrum. Harrison is clearly in pain, sorrowful and screaming for justice against a man who has committed so many wrongs, but Harrison did not say that something must be done about *Slughorn*. He said something must be done about *all this shit*. There is more to this reckless, self-sacrificing rage that borders on self-abuse than meets the eye. Severus watches his child rehydrate and thinks of how to say what needs to be said. He has a notion of why this is so violently disturbing to Harrison and prompting him to such disastrous actions, he has an inkling, but he will need to tread carefully.

“Harrison,” he begins. “I know what Draco did to you was -,”

“This isn’t about Draco!” Harrison predictably explodes. The glass Harrison is holding shatters in his hand. Severus waves his wand and reforms it, snatching it away before Harrison can explode it again.

“Isn’t it?” Severus knows he must speak the words if he is to get to the truth of Harrison’s complete, complex and forceful rage. “He forced himself on you.”

“People have been forcing themselves on me my whole life and no one does *anything!*” Harrison screams. “I am going to *do* something this time, with or without your help and if I have go and fucking *offer* myself to him to get someone to stop this motherfucking bullshit then THAT’S WHAT I’LL DO!”

Harrison is a whirlwind of heat, magic pulsing off him in hot waves of hatred but Severus forces himself to stand there, to endure it, because his child’s rage slips so fast into his child’s despair and Severus must witness it. Harrison must know he is not alone, that he can rage until the world ends and Severus will not leave him.

“He’s a *rapist!* He’s teaching kids! He’s been looking at Theo the way he looked at Apollonius, he *groomed* him! Just like Tom does, like he did to Regulus Black, like he did to -,”

Harrison stops speaking, biting his lip so violently that it bleeds.

“To me.” Severus completes the sentence and stares at his son. Harrison looks away abruptly, his eyes angry, eyes glittering with unspilled tears. Then, suddenly, there is a squeezing in the invisible tether around Severus’ wrist. Severus feels something agonising swell up inside him but he will not let it out. *My sorrow has no place here.* Severus simply watches. He knows those tears are not for him, or for Apollonius who abused and abandoned Theodore or the Dark Lord who has viciously ruined so much of Harrison’s young life. One tear trickles, unchecked, down Harrison’s face and something inside Severus breaks. Severus knows that expression, the impotent rage and sadness of it. The last time Harrison cried like this, without even realising, was after Petunia. *What happened, aside from Draco, to precipitate this fury? What poison is eating him from the inside out from his appalling childhood?* Severus decides it is enough, especially if the poison is pushing Harrison towards self-destruction.

“I have a question, Harrison.”

“What?” Harrison spits, his eyes and face still and watchful. Severus knows, the same way he knew that the marks on Regulus’ back didn’t come from falling from trees, that he’s on the right track and must continue. *Lily, help me do this.*

“You say it is not Draco. So who touched you?”

Harrison’s jaw ticks. He stands very still and Severus holds his breath, because he is not sure there is enough air in the room. It is all being forced out by Harrison’s rage.

“No one,” his voice trembles. It is only this that gives Severus the strength to carry on, despite the sensation that the air is becoming too hot to breathe. *He needs to speak the truth. The rage of it is consuming him.*

“Someone did.” Severus keeps his tone very level, his posture as relaxed as possible. He feels that if Harrison sees even a hint of threat, he will react without thought. Severus is not certain

Harrison could commit premeditated murder. He absolutely knows, however, that Harrison could kill someone on raw instinct. "There is something you have not told me yet."

"No one ever raped me, no one ever groped me, no one ever ..." Harrison lets out a frustrated growl and glares at Severus. "I know what you're trying to do, you're trying to pin it on something from the past but there's nothing there! Slughorn did something awful, he's just a *terrible person* -,"

"He is a terrible person," Severus affirms quietly. "He deserves to be fired. He deserves to go to Azkaban."

"Then why are you -?"

"Because you are willing to harm *yourself* to hurt him," Severus says. "That is not a reasonable response. That is a trauma response."

"Everything is always about fucking trauma with you!" Harrison sneers and Severus has to hold back a smirk at the irony. *You have no fucking idea*. "He was going to groom Theo -,"

"But Theodore has not been groomed," Severus says calmly. *At least not by Slughorn*. Apollonius certainly groomed Theodore for a war. "Theodore is safe. So this is not about Theodore."

"No, it's about Dumbledore protecting a pervert -,"

"And that is the full extent of your outrage?" Severus presses. "There is nothing else?"

"Yes!"

"I don't believe you."

"Then don't," Harrison snarls. "Whatever."

"Show me," Severus keeps his tone deliberately soft and notices how Harrison flinches. *Softness is not easy for him, just like me*. "Show me a memory of what you associate with all of this and I will help you."

Harrison stills, looks at him with eager eyes.

"You'll get him fired?"

"I will," Severus nods.

"But I have to show you first?" Harrison sneers. "It's a condition?"

"No, I will ensure his removal whether or not you share this with me," Severus says. The child is right, after all. Whatever Albus says, someone with a history of child abuse cannot be permitted to be around children. People can say many unflattering about Severus' teaching style but he will not permit this. "Trust me when I say there will be consequences for his

actions, but you are clearly in consuming pain and that is my primary concern. I would like for you to help me understand.”

Severus hesitates.

“Please.”

It is not a word that easily passes his lips, (or Harrison’s, Severus considers) so Severus waits. He watches Harrison’s eyes widen slightly and says nothing else. He reflects silently on how many moments he has felt this particular tension since Harrison crashed into his life, a fledgling Mage, with too much power and rage as endless as the stars. The unique terror and anticipation of watching his son decide whether or not to trust him, just a tiny bit more.

Trust me with this, Severus thinks. I will not let you down.

“Fine,” Harrison snaps. “but I want a secret after.”

At that moment, Severus knows that all of Harrison’s protestations that nothing happened are lies. Perhaps carefully constructed lies he has told himself, but lies nonetheless. Harrison would not trade a secret for nothing.

“Very well.”

Severus offers his child his hand. Harrison takes it, warily, but despite his guarded expression Severus feels his tether tightening, wrapping around their hands so their Prince rings sit almost flush to one another. *He wants me near. He might be afraid.* Severus looks into his son’s eyes and keeps his expression studiously blank, revealing no judgement.

“It is alright,” Severus murmurs. “This will not hurt, just reveal it to me the way you always do. Just breathe and show me what all of this makes you remember.”

Harrison takes a deep breath and nods. Severus has no need of the incantation, not with Harrison, the child who has always been able to leave memories ready to be viewed behind his eyes. All Severus has to do is witness them.

Severus watches a child, probably around six years old, pale skinned and dark haired with a rough lightning bolt scar, chased by boys. Bigger, stronger boys who have not been starved or kept in cupboards. The biggest one grabs the child and flattens him to the ground under his bulk.

“No, don’t, Dudley!” The little boy yells. “Stop, please!”

“Take them off him!” The bigger boy shouts as the other boys scramble to do as they’re told, jeering and laughing as they pull the trousers off the little boy. “Make Potty walk home in his pants!”

The other boys are dancing around, hooting and hollering, waving the baggy trousers like a flag: Poor pants Potty! Poor pants Potty! The little boy is left in the dirt, shivering,

struggling to pull the too big t-shirt he's wearing down over a grubby pair of underwear.

Severus' heart clenches, remembering the taunts that haunt him so persistently: *Snivelly Snivelly Snivellus* -

The child is still so young, sunburnt and dirty as he presses himself against the wall of the bathroom, a bathroom Severus horribly recognises from a memory of Petunia making him scrub the floor naked. He watches in horror as she pours bleach into the bathwater.

"Off with them!" She pulls at his clothes. The child hugs himself desperately. "Come on, I don't want to have a filthy thing like you in my house!"

"Don't," the child whispers. "Please."

The child is limp in her hands as she strips him, his eyes streaming but his mouth firmly closed. Severus will not look at the viciousness of her hands, ripping clothes off an unwilling, vulnerable child, instead he watches the blood on his child's bitten lip, the unshed tears in his eyes. She drops him into the sterile bathwater and the poor child gasps when bleach reaches cuts and bruises and places that should never be so exposed. Severus watches in horror as Petunia plunges his child's head under the water, watches Harrison's limbs flail so pitifully against her brittle arm, observes the cold, calculating expression on her face as she punishes Severus' son with drowning.

How often did it happen? Severus wonders bleakly. Let there be no more.

But the universe is infinitely crueller than Severus ever gives it credit, so of course, there is more.

Two boys chase a teenager, too skinny by far and wearing a wrist brace, a cut above his eye. One of the boys is weasel-looking beast, the other can be none other than the mountain of a cousin and it's the cousin who throws the stone, catching the back of the teenager's head and causing him to stumble. When he does, the cousin mounts him breathlessly, with enough force to break the teenager's knees.

"Fuck off, Dudley!" The teenager growls. "Or I will fucking end you -,"

"Can't do that without your stick," the cousin sneers, clamping his huge fists around the teenager's wrists. "Do it, Piers!"

It's a taser, placed in the centre of the chest. Severus stares as the teenager bucks but refuses to scream, his eyes violent and glassy, blood on his lips. He counts the seconds, knowing too well how many seconds can cause a catastrophic heart event.

“Do it again!” The cousin shuffles his bulk down with a horrible grin, pulling the waistband of Harrison’s jeans down to reveal his pale hip bones. “He’s a fucking fag, he probably likes it. Lower this time!”

Then, as if Harrison cannot bear to show anymore, memories become fast and fleeting.

Dolores Umbridge strips off his robes as the child closes his eyes wearily against whatever comes next, too used to it now to protest.

Bellatrix rips his shirt from him in the cage, even as Harrison strains against his shackles, making himself bleed with it and screams out of a mouth that has been sealed shut, his eyes streaming.

Lucius Malfoy approaches Harrison with a needle, even as he thrashes desperately to avoid it.

Draco forces Harrison against the wall of the pub, pushing an unwanted kiss against his lips.

Finally, it is done.

Harrison stares at him, eyes hard.

“It’s nothing bad,” Harrison says quietly. “Not like what Slughorn did to them.”

Severus is glad he is not standing up because he does not know how he would keep standing. He is also grateful he is still holding Harrison’s hand, that he has not pulled away, because Severus needs to assure himself that he is truly here, that he truly survived that which, for so many, would be unsurvivable.

“Harrison,” he begins quietly. “You may have never been raped but you have been -,”

“Been what?” Harrison snaps. “Been *what*? What do you even call it? Because, like, no one got *off* on it, not like Slughorn did -,”

“You are right, it is not the same,” Severus says, fighting to keep his voice even and calm because that is what his son needs right now. “But you are more than well versed in how it feels to have your consent removed.”

“Don’t,” the little child whispers. “Please.”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Harrison’s jaw is tight.

“It is not surprising, when faced with Slughorn’s actions, that you ... revisited these memories. That they inspired such rage inside you.” Severus squeezes Harrison’s hand, as

gently as he possibly can. “That you wished to cause him harm not only for what he has inflicted upon others but for what others have inflicted upon you.”

“I didn’t ...” Harrison takes a shuddering breath. “I couldn’t stop *any* of it.”

“I know.” Severus stares into his son’s green eyes which contain no memories, no words, only pain. “None of it, not a day, not a minute, not a *second* of any of it, was your fault.”

Harrison takes a sharp breath in. A tear falls. The tethers between them tighten, a tiny amount. Then he nods. Severus knows that Harrison doesn’t believe him. Severus does not care. He will tell him as many times as he has to for as long as it takes.

“I want my secret.”

Harrison has still not pulled his hand away. Severus wonders if he has forgotten or possibly, there is some comfort his son is taking from his touch.

“Ask it,” Severus nods.

“Did Voldemort make you to kill Tobias?”

Severus stares at his son. He remembers the last look in Tobias’ eyes. Sometimes, Severus tells himself that it was relief. He will not lie to Harrison right now, now matter how much he wants to.

“No,” Severus says. “He asked me to and I did it.”

“Why?” Harrison’s tone is unsurprised. Severus does not know whether to be thankful or not.

“Because I wanted to, so very badly,” Severus exhales heavily. “It was not until afterwards that I realised what it had cost me.”

“Tom made you a murderer,” Harrison whispers.

“No, Harrison, I did it to myself,” Severus feels as if the truth may cut his lips to speak but he does. “I was vengeful and short sighted and ... in want of his favour, above all else.”

“Because he promised you things,” Harrison’s eyes are sharp. “Like he promised me. Maybe like Slughorn told the boys he used.”

Severus understands the implication: *you were groomed for something too*. Severus realises then how much he has denied this, holding onto his own choice as if that somehow made it better. It is not true. He was used too.

“Much the same,” Severus nods.

Harrison nods and rubs a hand across his damp cheek. Still, Harrison does not withdraw his touch. Severus is stunningly relieved that he is allowed to keep holding the hand of his son even after admitting to committing patricide. Severus feels emboldened to go on.

"The Dark Lord places very little value on life," Severus begins haltingly. "Thus, he encourages those who follow him to think likewise, to see their fellow humans and wixen and the creatures around them things that can be disposed of at will. Death Eaters are indoctrinated to take a life for a myriad of reasons, for revenge, for convenience, for tactical opportunity, for the blood purist agenda but the reasons barely matter as long as they can take a life without compunction. The Dark Lord preaches that taking the lives of others is a solution to problems, for that is how he understands it."

"He told you that killing Tobias would solve your problems," Harrison whispers, eyes full of knowing. "He told me the same thing about Vernon."

"He lied," Severus says flatly. "The problem was not solved. Tobias was still with me, only now I had killed him so he could never leave me and the Dark Lord knew that. There are always consequences. He tells his followers that murder can be righteous, but I have never seen a righteous killer. The only outcome of devaluing life to such a degree is that the murderer in question values their own life less and less."

"That's what he wanted," Harrison's eyes are dawning with comprehension. "For you not to care if you lived or died."

"Yes." Severus rubs his thumb over his son's Prince ring and thinks how horrifying it is, how breathlessly awful it is, to raise a child in a world at war. "It is war, Harrison. People will die. The price of life will become horribly low. There will come times when you are forced to cast to kill in order to save yourself and people you love, but do not rush to those moments. I would not have you burdened so soon, least of all for such a stain on society as Horace Slughorn."

"Value life," Harrison's voice is broken. Severus remembers their conversation after Arthur Weasley's funeral on Skye. He nods. "Dumbledore thinks I feel sorry for Tom, he doesn't get it. I *don't* feel sorry for him it's not about that, it just ... justice *can't* be about how someone turns out when they're older."

"No, it cannot," Severus squeezes Harrison's hand. Of course he is sensitive to this notion. He is a child who grew up being told he was worthless and dirty and deserving of vile abuse and is now, as a teenager, looked upon as something monstrous. For him to hear, or intuit from Albus, that the people who abuse children who become monsters are not to be held to account, is of course causing a whirlpool of grief inside of him. Not grief for Tom Riddle, Severus sees, but grief for himself. Severus will not let his child drown in it.

"*Farzandam*, whoever you become, it will *never* mean that they were not very wrong to hurt you as they did."

Harrison takes a gasping, shuddering breath and shakes his head.

"Slughorn might be on our side but he's no different than Voldemort," he whispers. "Using people for his own stuff and - and I know it's a fucking war and there's no fairness, like, I'm not *stupid*, I know that Lucius Malfoy isn't going to put him in Azkaban, I *get it*, but ..."
Harrison's tears start to fall. "I can't fix your stuff or my stuff but this ... there have to be some *consequences*, right?"

Severus looks down at his son's hand. The fingers that are so like his own, even the hints of Tobias in them. He brushes his thumb over the Prince ring on his son's finger and feels the coldness there that reminds him of the dance of endless stars. The child is right, just as he said last year. There is no justice. Severus cannot get it for him, but he can, hopefully, do this.

"Yes," Severus voice is hoarse. "But you must allow me to be the one who brings those consequences, *farzandam*. You must trust me to ensure that he is removed from teaching. Do not risk your own wellbeing on such a disgusting excuse for a man. It is not your burden to bear. I am your ... Sire. Allow it to be mine."

Let me protect you, as a father should.

Harrison gives him a slightly frightened, anxious look and then nods slowly, starting to crumple, slightly.

"Alright," he mumbles. "Fuck. Yeah. Alright."

"Language," Severus moves to carefully and slowly put an arm around his child. "You are fatigued. Can I assist you to your bedroom?"

"Yeah."

Severus thinks he will never cease to find it miraculous, the way that when he least expects to be trusted by Harrison, at this moment of revealing to him that he killed his own father, Harrison easily lets his weight fall into Severus' side. He doubts that Harrison will ever let Severus hug him or hold him like Lupin can, but this is enough for Severus, this unexpected truth: *Despite all the reasons he should not, he still trusts me*. Severus presses his wand against the relevant stone and reveals the passageway through to his quarters. The snake follows them, quickly hissing her way towards Severus' fire, which automatically bursts into dancing flames when they enter the room.

"Bed too far," Harrison stumbles over to the sofa and collapses into it. Severus is not surprised by the drawn look on his face. Expelling poison, magical depletion and a lengthy engagement with some of his most traumatic memories has clearly exhausted him. Harrison opens an eye to stare at him. "Are you going to see Dumbledore?"

"Yes," Severus has many things to say to the man and none of them good. "I will call Lupin through."

"Don't bother him," Harrison says drowsily. "I'll just ... sleep."

Severus looks at the clock. It is already past midnight and Harrison's eyes are drooping.

"Kreacher!" Severus calls softly. The elf appears, a scowl on his face.

"Is Master dead? What has Master done now to impede the honour of his house?" The elf snarls and, before Severus can stop him, slaps Harrison around the face.

"Ow!" Harrison glares up at the elf. "You fucking elf-shaped psychopath I was *sleeping*!"

“And why does Master sleep in Lord Prince’s quarters rather than in his bed with Heir Nott?” Kreacher demands. “Is Master a drunkard again? What foolishness has Master got into since this morning?”

“Unfortunately, your Master has been poisoned but is on his way to making a quick recovery,” Severus says, pulling some more dried dandelion out of a drawer as well as Harrison’s nightly potion to stave off the suicidal nightmares. He shows one of the poison litmus papers to Kreacher. “Test his saliva in an hour. If it is still showing as grey, give him some more herb and a cup of the sage tea.”

“And make sure I don’t piss myself,” Harrison mumbles. Kreacher smacks him about the head.

“I will make sure unfortunate Master does not die,” Kreacher grumbles. “But waking up in pissy pants would be suitable punishment for being so riddiculous a Lord.”

“You’re a dick, Kreacher.”

“Master is dick.”

“Hey!”

“That will do,” Severus says. He catches Harrison’s eye. “Go to sleep.”

Harrison nods wearily and closes his eyes. Severus gives the elf a sharp look, his feelings clear: *keep watch over my child*. Kreacher gives him a firm nod. Despite Harrison’s worry, Severus quickly pens a note and feeds it through the floo to Remus:

The child is with me for the night. All is well though the edges are not as they could be. He has shared some of the horrors of his childhood. I go to meet with Albus but the elf keeps watch. S.S.

As he walks out into the dark night of Hogwarts, he considers the litany of his child’s abuse. It is horrifying and yet, nastily familiar. After all, would Severus’ own memories not follow a similar pattern if they were laid out, just so? He remembers Tobias pulling him out of bed, dressed only in his pants to beat him outside. He remembers the mortification of that, the same humiliation he recalls when Black would turn him upside down to reveal his underwear to the laughing fifth years. His own past is a similar childhood of abuse, an adolescence of bullying, and an adulthood marked by dalliances with madmen and torturers. It is hideous, Severus thinks, to realise that his child has inadvertently inherited a history of trauma so similar to his own.

Lily, how do I guide him to survive something I am still trying to learn how to survive?

Severus finds that the door to Albus’ office is open and looking a little worse for the wear. He recognises that tell-tale splitting of the wood, as if lightning has struck it. *Harrison*. He steps inside pure chaos and could almost smirk.

“Severus,” Albus looks up from where he is carefully reassembling a delicate glass contraption with his wand. “I suppose I should have expected you.”

“All the glass, was it?” The remnants of Albus’ windows crunch under Severus’ boots. Albus nods and continues to wave his wand in slow circles.

“I am afraid, for that reason, I cannot offer you anything to drink,” Albus says.

“I have no need of refreshment,” Severus waves his wand to relight Albus’ fireplace and stands in front of it. “Fire him.”

“You have come to talk of Horace,” Albus sighs. “I cannot fire him.”

“You must fire him. To not do so would be an act of terrible negligence.”

“Severus, I do not have another Potions Master I can simply pluck out of thin air,” Albus’ voice is sharper than usual.

“Of course you do,” Severus leans a hand against the marble mantelpiece. “I will return to the position. It is easy enough to summon someone to teach Defence. You have done so every year since 1970.”

“Severus, since I have gone through nearly twenty-five applicants in as many years, you can surely see that it is, in fact, not easy to summon someone to fill that particular position,” Albus places the repaired contraption down on his desk with a firm click. “Not to mention that my political position incites precariousness. People do not rush to my call, Severus, when they realise that to accept a job in this castle at the moment is more or less to declare a political allegiance. Horace is unique in that manner in that he is neutral.”

“He is not neutral,” Severus says. “He is bound to the Dark Lord more intimately than most. You must know that the Dark Lord would use that secret, if he needed to.”

“And Horace, undoubtedly, could weaponise the same secret,” Albus shakes his head. “Nevertheless, it is hard to find a Potions professor or even a Defence Professor who is available in the middle of the term.”

“Then call in one of your troops,” Severus says evenly. “Ask Lupin. Ask Weasley. Ask Nymphadora. They could all adequately teach defence.”

“They could, but their connection to me, their role as ‘my troops’ as you put it, will not go without notice,” Albus rubs his forehead. “If I fire Horace in the middle of the academic year, the Minister will rush to fill the void and if I beat him to it, then he will protest and likely, we will find ourselves at an unfortunate end; a spy for the Minister filling Horace’s position.”

“You could expose him to the Board of Governors,” Severus says quietly. “He is a pederast. The Sacred Twenty Eight permits many terrible things in the privacy of their homes but not in their halls of education.”

“And who would that benefit?” Albus sighs. “Certainly not us. Horace would feel betrayed and likely look for other sponsors for his favour, likely Voldemort. He may not have your

talent, Severus, but he has undeniable connections. To allow Voldemort access to all of that ...”

Severus feels a deep swirl of dislike for Albus who, even in light of such terrible revelations, is only thinking of the pieces on the Go Board inside his mind. Severus heaps snow onto his rage inside his mindscape. No matter how much he wants to, he will not lose his temper with Albus. It would have the opposite impact of what he desires from this meeting which is to displace Horace Slughorn, effective immediately. He knows it will be impossible to have him sent to Azkaban (Lucius would never hand down the sentence and the Dark Lord would likely scoop Horace up before he even got close to island) but Severus will get the man out of the castle before the morning.

“Then allow me to fill his role and search for my replacement,” Severus says evenly. “I am, I wager, far easier to replace.”

“Voldemort wants you in the role of Defence Professor,” Albus’ eyes are sharp suddenly. “I do not know why you have tried to conceal it from me, but I know that he does.”

Severus does not ask how.

“And you’re interested in honouring his choices?”

“I find there is value in placing my spy exactly where Voldemort thinks his spy should be,” Albus waves his wand to repair his windows and lowers himself heavily into the chair by the fire, gesturing for Severus to accept the offer. He does not, merely stands and looks down at the man.

“Albus,” Severus keeps his voice level. “He cannot stay in his role.”

“That is not entirely accurate,” Albus tents his fingers. “If he teaches with a chaperone, if his club meetings are disbanded, if we never permit him to be alone with a student -,”

“No,” Severus shakes his head. “He is a predator and predators will always find prey. If you will not report him to the DMLE then you must, at least, remove him entirely from the castle.”

“It is a house of cards,” Albus looks at him steadily. “One false move and all tumbles down.”

“You misunderstand me,” Severus says, holding Albus’ gaze. “If you do not make a move to displace him, I will.”

“What move can you make?” Albus’ voice is soft but his eyes are fixed on Severus’ face. “If you report him to the DMLE then you will be subject to Voldemort’s displeasure as well as the Minister for Magic.”

“I can send an anonymous complaint, I can have my child removed from his clutches even if you will not protect others and, if I determine it necessary, Albus, I can set my wand tip to your house of cards and burn it down entirely,” Severus says. “I can leave and take my child with me. I can leave *you* and tell the whole world why.”

“We have discussed this,” Albus closes his eyes slowly.

“Yes, you have explained, very clearly, how you will cut me loose as your asset if I do not comply.” Severus keeps his tone level. “I have, I believe, made it equally clear that when it comes to the issue of my child’s safety, I will not compromise. Fire him. Immediately.”

Albus stares at Severus for a long moment.

“Who can fill his role, then?” Albus says quietly. “Who will satisfy Lucius Malfoy and the Dark Lord and not be a threat to us here? It is only you, Severus, and I cannot duplicate you.”

“Of course you can,” Severus smiles at the obviousness of it. “Lady Malfoy.”

“Lady Malfoy? She does not have the mark,” he muses softly. Albus has no notion of Narcissa’s loyalty to Harrison, of the incredible risks she takes daily to protect him, Severus, and her own son. Yet he does know who is a Death Eater and who is not. “But she is a Runes Master and we do not need one of those.”

“She is a supreme brewer, you know that as well as I, she was the highest NEWT score of her year and could easily have done a Mastery.”

“One could say that she did, in her friendship with you,” Albus muses. Severus does not comment. “Does Lucius Malfoy still believe you are having an affair?”

“Is it relevant?”

“Everything is relevant.”

Severus does not think a phrase has more adequately summed up Albus’ approach to life than this. Not only is everything relevant, Albus believes everything is his business. *Every tiny detail of our lives is a card he will play, whatever the cost.*

“Yes, he does believe that,” Severus says. Albus nods curiously but asks no more. Severus continues. “She can easily teach Potions.”

“We require the teachers of OWLS and NEWTS to be Masters, Severus.”

“Then I will teach OWLS and NEWTS across both disciplines,” Severus says, barely sparing a thought for the fucking work that will be. “We will share both roles. She is an excellent duellist. She can teach the lower years in both Potions and Defence.”

“A clean division of labour,” Albus nods and Severus thinks, just maybe, he may have found his way to a solution. “I cannot imagine the Board will find it compelling.”

“The Board will do as you tell them to, Albus, particularly if you're putting the Minister for Magic's wife in a position,” Severus says. “And any board that can employ Gilderoy Lockhart can easily employ a Runes Master with outstanding Defence and Potions skills.”

"True," Albus smiles thinly. "They certainly cannot penalise me for Horace's decision to return to retirement, especially when it took so much to get him out of it in the first place."

Severus can already see how Albus will spin this and feels a trickle of disquiet.

"If you will not tell the Board of Governors the true reason for his dismissal, I insist you tell the rest of the staff," Severus says. "We will need to be aware of the students he has interacted with so far this year in light of these ... revelations."

And hope to God he has touched no one else.

"I shall tell Minerva. She can disseminate the information." Albus waves his hand as if the revelations mean nothing to anyone. "Lady Malfoy is a tidy enough solution although ..."

"Yes?"

"She would likely hurry young Draco along in his plans."

"Does that worry you?" Severus tilts his head. "If you wish for more life, Albus, then you must allow me to treat your arm."

"I do not wish for more time, Severus, only enough time to do what is necessary."

Severus stares at Albus levelly.

"Horcruxes," he says. Albus only nods. Severus feels a flash of anger that this man, this foolish supremely high-minded man, thought to keep such a secret from him but share it with Severus' own son, but he rapidly buries it under a heavy snowfall inside his mind. In this, he knows, he must not be clouded by fury. "I would question the relevancy you felt in sharing such news with a sixteen year old rather than those in the Order."

"It is a dread secret."

"One you chose to share with my child."

"Actually, one Harry chose to share with me."

Severus can see that he is going to get nowhere so he switches to what matters, what always matters most: Keeping the child alive.

"You mean to destroy them?"

"We have destroyed three between us," Albus says, seemingly unable to stop himself sounding a little smug. "Harry two and I one."

Then my son has, once again, being doing the bulk of your dirty work, Severus thinks but doesn't say it.

"And how does one begin to destroy such a being?"

“Harry achieved it with basilisk venom, I with fiendfyre, not before its curse brutalised me,” Albus sighs and looks at his hand. “The third I am not sure how. Harry may be able to cast fiendfyre, though I suppose he could have learned it from you, Severus.”

Severus is not in the mood to circle back around to Albus’ irrelevant fascination with what spells Severus has taught Harrison. He is too fixated upon one fact: the motherfucking cursed ring that Harrison tells him holds the Slytherin and Peverell magic. Clearly it is even more than just that.

“Are you telling me that the ring my son has been wearing is a *horcrux remnant*?”

“It is harmless now,” Albus waves his cursed hand, a small flake of dead, black skin floating to the floor, which shows how much he knows because the harmless ring includes two incredibly powerful magics that are now at his son’s disposal. “And I believe there to be four others in existence.”

“Items close to the Dark Lord?” Severus imagines what he would do if he had soul pieces to hide. “Hidden at discreet locations?”

“I think you and Tom Riddle have different notions of discreet, no,” Albus shakes his head. “I rather think he would choose locations that are ... important to him in some way. Locations that speak to important, personal victories. The site of one of his first murders, the house of one of his trusted advisors ...”

“I do not see what victory the second represents.”

“Tom coveted Abraxas’ friendship for one reason only, the access it gave him,” Albus stares into the fire. “I imagine it would have titillated him greatly to mark an Heir like Abraxas, to have a man like that bow at his feet and surrender his life and his house and his family to his needs.”

Severus considers then just how well Albus knows the Dark Lord, perhaps the only man left alive who knew him as a child, a Lord and then a monster. For the first time, Severus considers what they will lose when Albus is gone, but now is not the time for such troubling thoughts.

“Do you have a notion of where the others will be?” Severus demands.

“I do,” Albus looks at him. “I may need Harry’s assistance.”

“You cannot have it,” Severus glares down at him. “You can have mine.”

“I can?” Albus raises his bushy eyebrows.

“Yes,” Severus folds his arms. “If you have Horace out of the castle by morning, warn him that if he touches another child he shall suffer, inform the staff so they can adequately care for *your* students and hire Lady Malfoy.”

“You are sure she will accept?”

“Yes.” Severus will ensure it. “And unlike her predecessor, she will never molest a child.”

Albus winces but Severus does not feel sorry for him.

“I can assure you, Severus, Horace will be made to understand the full consequences of his actions,” Albus’ voice is quiet but full of magic for a second and Severus is reminded of the moment he, Albus and Minerva burst in on Barty Crouch before he murdered Harrison after the third task. The raw power in the air. “He will never harm another child.”

“Your assurances would have been more valuable before you hired him.”

Albus looks weary and leans back in his chair, gazing into the fire.

“Happiness is pleasure without regret,” Albus murmurs.

“Tolstoy,” Severus recognises the quote. “By that measure you will never be happy, Albus.”

Albus merely nods. Severus wonders if it is this desolate self acceptance, a kind of emotional martyrdom, that allows Albus the ease of mind to treat everyone he meets like a motherfucking chess piece to be sent into battle at the most opportune time.

“I will accept your terms, Severus.”

“Good.”

“If you will swear to help me find and destroy *all* of Tom Riddle’s horcruxes, wherever they may be.”

Severus stares at him. It’s to be expected, of course, that Albus would throw something into the mix just when Severus began to feel as if he has the upper hand.

“And on what would you have me swear?” Severus asks drolly. “The blood in my body?”

“Your good word would be enough, Severus,” Albus says quietly. “I know from experience you do not take vows lightly.”

Severus won’t wince. He has been in Albus’ service for seventeen years, held only through his word. He sees no danger in swearing to destroy the Dark Lord’s soul pieces, beyond the obvious very real and present danger of setting oneself against such a monster, but Severus is doing that daily anyway. He nods to Albus.

“I swear I will help you destroy the horcruxes,” he says.

“Good,” Albus extends his hand. Severus accepts it, warily, feels a tinge of magic in his palm and then looks curiously up at Albus. “Merely holding you at your word, my dear boy.”

“Because my word has proven so fragile over the years,” Severus turns and walks to the door. “You have a professor to fire and I have a son to comfort.”

“A son,” Albus’ soft tone catches Severus’ attention at the battered door. He is sat back in his seat, fingers tented, his eyes fixed on the flame. “It is strange to hear that word from your lips, Severus.”

“It is what he is,” Severus says abruptly.

“What you have been,” Albus whispers, his mournful eyes fixing on Severus. “To me.”

Severus hand clenches on the door. He doesn’t want to think about how, for the last sixteen years, Albus has been the closest thing to a father in his own life. Now, becoming a father to his own child has disrupted the balance between them and Severus does not have time or space to mourn that. He is a father now and somewhere in the dungeons, his traumatised child is sleeping and Severus wants nothing more than to be within calling distance of him. The time when he would have trusted Albus to direct him towards the right path has passed. Severus must make these decision on his own, for him and his son.

“You shall have to get your door fixed, Albus,” Severus says and leaves his old mentor by the fire, alone.

Severus walks back down to his quarters, clenching and unclenching his fists, the uncanny feeling that Albus has somehow got exactly what he wanted dogging his every step. Three or four times, he stops in his tracks, turning towards the hospital wing, fighting his urge to go and visit Horace privately and test his latest internal combustion brew on him, before reminding himself that his first and only task is his son, currently sleeping in his quarters. When he finally enters, Severus is surprised to find none other than Remus Lupin sitting on his sofa, drinking a cup of tea.

“What are you doing here?” Severus hisses, slamming the door behind him and swallowing back his own visceral relief. *Thank God, I don’t have to deal with this alone.* “We said *only* for emergencies.”

“When our son discovers his teacher is a child molester, I consider that an emergency.” Lupin sets down his cup of tea. His eyes are fiercely amber. Severus sighs and leans against the door.

“He told you,” Severus looks around the room. “He’s in bed?”

Lupin nods.

“I came through when I received your note. Harry was still awake,” Lupin rolls up his sleeves. Severus notices that he only wearing a cardigan thrown over pyjamas. He must have been readying for sleep when he received it. For some reason, it lessens a tension inside Severus’ chest to imagine Lupin jumping out of bed and into the flames to rush to their child’s side. “Horcruxes?”

Severus sighs and crosses to join him on the sofa with a slight groan.

“What do you know of them?”

“Very little, but the Congregation archives are vast. I will know more in a week.”

“Good,” Severus leans his head back and tries to ignore the tingling sensation when Lupin rubs his knee. Given the hours he spent kneeling before the Dark Lord earlier in the evening, it feels heavenly.

“Horace.”

“Yes.”

"He's going to be fired?"

"Yes, only fired, and only the staff will know the truth of why. The Board of Governors will think he has merely slunk back into retirement and no charges will be brought." Severus feels his exhaustion thawing through the snow that covers his rage. “It seems that once again the political climate in this nation determines that justice shall not be served.”

"In this nation, maybe," Lupin gives him a sharp, predatory look. "I have every intention of informing the Contessa."

"Without a living victim to press charges ..." Severus sighs. "I cannot imagine that the Dark Lord will be first in line to admit he was once violated by Horace Slughorn."

"The Contessa will not stand for a paedophile having taught her son," Lupin says flatly. "She will likely send her own spies to watch him from now on. If he makes a wrong move, she will act."

"What could she do?"

"Did you know that Horace Slughorn has a second home in the Algarve?"

"Yes, he's boasted of it," Severus thinks he sees a plan forming. "You imagine he will remove there now he has been fired?"

"I'm sure the Contessa can lure him there." Lupin's eyes glow like vengeful fires. "Then, if he touches a child again, or even behaves inappropriately with one, he will be charged and locked away in a Congregation prison."

"Working outside the system, I see."

"Working in whatever system I find myself in," Lupin smirks and Severus is reminded suddenly, of their son.

"It is poor recompense for the many students he must have hurt over the years," Severus mutters.

"I know," Lupin sighs. "But perhaps seeing him ruined will inspire other victims to step forward."

"It is not enough," Severus berates himself. *How many have there been, over the years?* "I should have seen it."

"We grew up with him, Severus." Lupin's fingers do not stop in their slow, insistent massage of his kneecap. "It is harder to recognise problematic behaviour in someone you have known since childhood."

"Still." Severus swallows and stares at the ceiling. "Regulus."

Lupin's fingers still, just for a second.

"Do you think ...?"

"Nothing like this, Regulus never made it into the inner circle and didn't want to be there but he tried to tell me, once, that Horace ... looked at him," Severus shakes his head. "I didn't listen."

"He looked at Sirius too," Lupin resumes his slow stroking. "But *everyone* admired the Blacks, Andromeda and Narcissa too, they were all compelling, I never suspected ..."

"We should have."

Lupin sighs heavily. Severus knows he agrees as only a fellow teacher can.

"Minerva will be livid when she finds out."

"Not as livid as Pomona," Severus mutters. He is not looking forward to that staff meeting. "She might send Devil's Snare to the hospital wing."

"Chance would be a fine thing."

Severus doesn't disagree, even after the lengthy conversation he has had tonight with his son about the mental consequences of vengeful murder. *It does not make the fantasy less appealing.*

"What did Harry tell you?" Lupin asks quietly. "About his childhood?"

Severus closes his eyes tightly, seeing Harrison's memories behind his eyelids.

"I will put it into the pensieve later," Severus murmurs.

"You can't tell me?"

"I understand the necessity of it but ...," Severus' voice cracks. He swallows hard and he can feel Lupin staring at him intently. "I cannot at this precise moment, no."

Lupin's hand stills on his thigh.

"He wasn't ..." Lupin's voice is scratchy. "Did somebody like Horace -?"

“No,” Severus can at least reassure Lupin of that, though it feels like meagre prize to offer. “Not that, at least. But a litany of ...”

“Of what?”

“Petunia stripped him naked against his will and tried to drown him in a bath of bleach when he was still an infant. I do not know how many times it happened, I do not know how young he was when she began.” Severus hates the words that fall out of lips like vomit, tasting just as acidic and vile, but Lupin does need to know and if he cannot wait to see the memories then Severus will at least share some of the worst burden on his heart. “I do not know what to call it, physical abuse? Sexual abuse? Calculated humiliation of a child? Attempted murder? I do not *know*, Remus, and it is only *one* instance of her cruelty that demonstrates Harrison’s familiarity with having all of his personal boundaries violated.”

Lupin’s silence is long and taut. Severus does not interrupt, but he does gently clamp his hand over Lupin’s hand on his thigh, just to reassure himself that the werewolf is not going to jump into the floo, bound for Privet Drive, set on revenge.

“I knew there was a lot of physical abuse and neglect,” Lupin’s voice is soft when he does speak. “But the more I learn, the more I see how ... they were *vindictive*.”

“Yes,” Severus snorts. It is an understatement. He opens his eyes and looks into Lupin’s distraught and baffled face.

“To feel that kind of spite towards a child, it’s ...” Lupin shakes his head. “It’s beyond me.”

Severus thinks of Tobias.

“It is not beyond me,” he shakes his head. “I should have recognised it, I should have seen it *all* the minute I met the child and yet I was so *blinded* by my own prejudice -,”

“You had no idea he was your child and even with the purest heart in the world, you could never have cared for James’ child,” Lupin says drily.

“I did not need to care for him, I only needed to see him,” Severus snaps. “To see the hints of abuse that were there. I didn’t not see Horace’s abuse, I did not see Petunia’s abuse - I could have known my son -,”

“You know your son now,” Lupin’s eyes are very orange.

“And if I had known him then?” Severus presses, the torturous words continuing to flow. “If he had a father then? If he had a guardian to protect him from entering the Tournament? He might never have faced the Dark Lord, never have suffered the cruciatus curse -,”

“I can see you wish to hang yourself with the past, Severus, but I won’t do it for you,” Lupin pinches his thigh, a little too hard.

Severus snorts with derision. *As if this is the part of my past that I would hang myself with today.* As for changes to the past, he is haunted with it, his soul weary with all the things he cannot change, his own father’s life that he cannot give back. Severus swallows hard, feeling

as if the words he must speak are made of lead. *I killed Tobias. I killed my father when I was seventeen and this evening I told our son about it.* He cannot make the words come out.

“I should have known,” Severus finds himself muttering instead, eyes pinched closed. “Of all people, I know the signs, I should have been -,”

“Sev.” It is surprise that forces Severus’ eyes open. Lupin hasn’t used that particular endearment so deliberately in a long time, not outside the frantic, gasping moments of their amorous activities. Lupin’s eyes are sharp but somehow, also majestically kind. “Don’t. We cannot change what happened to Harry. All we can do is help him understand it, help him get justice when he is ready to face it, and protect him in the future.”

A simple sentence that encompasses the hardest task of Severus’ life.

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Lupin gives him a sharp look.

Tell him, you coward. Severus cannot speak. His past hangs around his neck like a millstone and for the first time in a long time, he fears how the darkness of his life in Spinner’s End may pollute his present. So he merely nods. After all, Lupin is not wrong. They have work to do and a son to protect. So Severus pushes all memories of Tobias’ last stare to the back of his mind and takes a deep breath.

“Yes,” Severus says. Speak to me of horcruxes.”

— — —

I’m sleeping down at Severus’

Your meeting with the headmaster did not go well, I take it

He’s a prat.

I could feel how angry you were.

Well. I guess that’s good for your experiment, right? About the bond?

Yeah.

Severus is fixing it. Do I even want to ask how Slughorn is?

He's alive.

Pissing hell.

Yeah.

Are you okay?

I don't know. I'm not sure I would know what okay looks like tonight. Are you?

I exploded Dumbledore's windows.

Good for you.

I love you so fucking much. I just need you to know that tonight. I love you so, so much.

I love you too. Did something happen?

Severus and I talked. About some of the past stuff.

Privet Drive stuff?

Yeah.

I'm proud of you.

You are?

Yes. It takes courage to talk about everything that happened in that house.

I'm really proud of you too. The stuff with Apollonius tonight, that wasn't easy either.

No, it wasn't. But in a way, I'm glad I know. Because it means the way he was ... It wasn't all me.

None of it was you. Something bad happened to him but that doesn't make what he did to you right. None of it was your fault.

It wasn't yours either, beloved.

Calling me that nearly got us into trouble tonight.

Doesn't mean I'm going to stop.

Do you know what the hor-thingies really are? Or how we get rid of them?

No. But I'm going to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe your edges are like razors today. Maybe you need to know that there will come a day, one day, when you are turning to another person who is just like you and saying what I'm saying now:

Take it from one person with PTSD to another. The edges can soften. It's possible to survive this and to live in this world with triggers all around you, to move through it gracefully. You are a survivor. You are a Prince. You are going to survive.

Professor Malfoy

Chapter Notes

Please pay attention to the tags. This story is about trauma in all directions.

This time, Theo does politics.

Next time, Harry has feelings about Theo doing politics.

Severus,

Is there a reason why Professor Dumbledore has asked me to teach? You should be warned. Lucius is furious. As is Draco. And one of my correspondence corvids has a broken wing. Consequently, I find I am urgently desirous of your company.

Your own,

Narcissa

Narcissa,

I find I care little of their bad opinion as long as my Master has a good one.

It is terrible news about one of your corvids. It behoves me to say how ardently I long for your presence.

Your own dearest,

Severus

- - - -

Severus,

The Dark Lord may be content with your scheme to install my wife in your quarters but I am not.

Tread carefully,

Lucius

Lucius,

Since I only have one Lord and Narcissa seems happy with the arrangement of my quarters, I find I care little for your contentment.

Professor Severus Snape

- - - -

Harry,

Having told Professor Snape and Ambassador Lupin about Professor Slughorn's past, I hope I can trust you not to share the circumstances of his early retirement abroad. You can appreciate how it would not be beneficial to have anyone look too closely at the reasons. Particularly for young Mr Nott.

Professor Dumbledore

Headmaster,

I told my parents that one of my teachers was a rapist. I don't think that's weird.

I thought I was pretty clear before but in case I wasn't, I only want to talk to you about defeating Voldemort.

Harry Potter-Black

- - - -

Dumbledore told me we can't say anything about Slughorn.

About why he was fired?

Yeah.

Do you think he has to tell the staff?

Remus said he would.

Well, I'm not planning on telling anyone what he did to Apollonius.

Me either. Any luck with soul bits?

Horcruxes, Harry

Soul bits is easier to say.

There are no books in the Hogwarts library about soul bits.

Did you use the cloak for the Restricted Section?

No, Harry, have you used the cloak for the restricted section?

Harry?

No.

Such a liar.

Rude.

Do you have any ideas about what items he would turn into a horcrux?

Dumbledore showed me all those weird memories. Maybe something in there.

Like your ring in the Marvolo memory

Yeah, maybe the mouth organ or something.

Where would the Dark Lord hide a mouth organ?

Up Lucius Malfoy's arse, probably.

Helpful.

I try.

Dear Professor Snape,

After hearing the Headmaster's account of why Professor Slughorn will be taking early retirement and hearing that you shall be covering both disciplines for the next two weeks, we offer our services to cover your Defence classes until Professor Malfoy can be installed in her new position at the beginning of December.

Signed:

Professor McGonagall

Professor Flitwick

Professor Babbling

Professor Vector

Dear Severus,

I understand from Minerva that you are, in part, responsible for the dismissal of Horace Slughorn. You should know, when a wixen is known to be a paederast, even if they are imprisoned and penalised by the DMLE, there is a charter in the Silver Hall to which their name is added. These individuals are wixen whom a goblin can kill in combat without any censure from the Sovereign. I have seen to it that Horace Slughorn's name has been added.

May your brews be deadly and your casting arm fast,

Filius.

Dear Severus,

Please enjoy this mandrake juice for your potions. One of my first years was due to start Remedial Potions with Horace in January. So far, we think he was the only one.

Thank you, on his behalf.

Pomona

P.S. Mr Nott's boomslang shed her skin in the greenhouse. He has given me permission to pass it on to you for use in Potions. I think you should take that as a thank-you gift from the young man. Your advocacy will not be forgotten.

- - - - -

Severus,

Weapons for our cause as elucidated by the Congregation archives:

Fiendfyre

Basilisk venom

The Killing Curse

The Spear of Longinus

Kusanagi no Tsurugi

Gungnir

Excalibur

It is not as extensive a list as I had hoped.

R.L

Lupin,

That list is neither extensive nor comprehensive, considering only the first three are not mythological weapons. Luckily, our child has access to Basilisk venom.

I promised you a forewarning - Lucius believes I am becoming bold in my affair with his wife and is monitoring our correspondence. So I must appear bold. She will likely be frequently staying in my quarters when Lucius permits her to take up her role.

S.S.

Severus,

Thank you for the forewarning. As long as neither her nor her husband, find their way into your bed, I don't care.

R.L.

Lupin,

Only you.

S.S.

“I am disappointed in your son, Lucius, so *imagine* how disappointed I am in *you!* *Crucio!*”

Severus watches Lucius writhe on the floor, screaming. Severus is exhausted, he has already spent an hour on his knees under the cruciatus curse in punishment for Harrison’s inability to produce the raven magic, and now Lucius is suffering for Draco’s failures.

“Poisoning Horace Slughorn was not the goal! In a second failed attempt to undo Dumbledore, Horace Slughorn has been so injured that he cannot continue his role and must be replaced by your *wife* -, ”

“Forgive us, my Lord!” Lucius gasps.

“Forgive you for what? For needing Lady Black to save your son’s mistakes? It seems the House of Black prevails still, *despite* the House of Malfoy’s every effort and the *meagre* attempts of the House of Lestrangle -,”

“Everything in the House of Black shall be yours, my Lord,” Bellatrix gasps (she’s also had her fair share of torture this evening).

“Why should I believe you? The House of Malfoy and the House of Lestrangle have failed me with their offerings! I shall have to put my hope in ... much younger blood.”

The Dark Lord nods to the sidelines where Dolohov is watching and Severus is surprised when he opens a door and Cornelius Tremblay steps out. Unfortunately, he is not alone. Beside him, Severus feels Narcissa gasp to see her son step forward. All Severus finds he can think is *how the hell did Draco get out of Hogwarts?* The only thing he can think of is that Albus must be away again, as he has so often been since the presence of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes were uncovered.

“Draco, my sweet boy,” the Dark Lord croons, stretching out a long hand for Draco. Severus watches how Cornelius places his hand on Draco’s lower back, gently urging him forward. “Don’t you want to serve me?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Draco whispers.

“Then show me what your Aunt and dear cousin Cornelius have taught you,” the Dark Lord twists Draco’s shoulders so he is standing directly in front of his kneeling father. Severus swallows hard and Narcissa’s hand twitches. Instinctively, Severus holds her hand tight behind her back. He knows she will not intervene, she is too intelligent not to weigh the risks, but it is her son. It is the father of her children. It is too much for anyone to bear alone.

“Yes, my Lord,” Draco repeats. His words have taken on a mechanical quality. After all, these are the three words his parents have drilled into him when standing before the Dark Lord.

“Cornelius, come and help your young suitor,” the Dark Lord smirks. Cornelius nods and eagerly steps up to stand behind Draco, wrapping an arm around his waist and sliding the other down his wand arm, slowly lifting Draco’s wand until it points at his father. Severus watches Draco’s face. He sees the fluttering relief in Draco’s eyelids when Cornelius touches

him and feels a spear of worry. *How much does my godson trust Tremblay?* Severus fears it is much too much. Cornelius whispers something in Draco's ear and Draco's physical resolve stiffens.

"*Imperio!*" Draco whispers. It doesn't surprise Severus in the least that this is the unforgivable curse Draco has the most affinity with. Malfoys, after all, are bred to believe they should always be in control, that they are the puppet masters and everyone else is the puppets. It was the height of hilarity, really, that Lucius claimed to be under the imperius curse in the last war. No one utilised that spell more in the service of the Dark Lord than Abraxas and Lucius Malfoy.

"Very good, Draco! A family favourite," the Dark Lord cackles as Lucius goes slack. "What would you have him do, Draco? How would you punish your father for your failings?"

"Whatever my lord thinks is just punishment," Draco whispers in a trembling voice.

"I have a suggestion, my Lord," Cornelius says, with all the eagerness of a new Death Eater on the rise, too young and fresh to know how the arduous nature of the Dark Lord's service.

"Very good, young Tremblay," the Dark Lord sneers. All of his praise sounds like disparagement. "Share it with young Draco."

Cornelius once again whispers in Draco's ear. Severus watches Draco's eyes widen and spares a meagre thought for Lucius in the face of whatever is coming to him. Draco holds his wand steady.

"Command him," Cornelius runs a hand up and down Draco's back possessively and Narcissa digs her nails into the back of Severus' hand.

"Cut ... your hair," Draco whispers. Severus watches as Lucius lifts his own wand and utters a severing spell. White blonde locks fall to the floor. Absurdly, Severus cannot stop himself from thinking of how he used to wrap Lucius' hair around his hands and pull it like reins, just as Lucius liked, when they used to fuck. Narcissa's hand relaxes. She's right, of course, losing Lucius' hair will not kill him nor emotionally scar Draco too awfully. Lucius, however, when he comes around, will be devastated.

"Very good, Draco!" The Dark Lord cackles. "Lucius' pride severing Lucius' pride! Such a delicious parallelism, even Dumbledore would be delighted!"

"End the curse," Cornelius says. His eyes are bright with triumph. Severus thinks he understands a little more about the Tremblay heir at this moment. The Tremblays are a French wixen family whose only note in the history books was their repeated ability to marry into the family of their more prestigious cousins, the Lestranges. Cornelius will likely have spent his entire life knowing that since the last Lestrangle Lord was rotting in Azkaban without fathering any children he could wed, he was cut off from his ascendancy into the Lestrangle family that he would so dearly covet, especially as a claimed bastard rather than a truly legitimate Tremblay heir. Children like Draco, and families like the Malfoys who avoided the sting of Azkaban and flourished would no doubt, Severus assumes, garner intense resentment from Cornelius. Yet now here he is, a favourite of the Dark Lord, the next

Lord Lestrangle thanks to his uncle's death and his Aunt's favouritism, and in control of one of the most powerful heirs in the country and currently also his father, the Minister for Magic. Severus thinks that Cornelius must be dizzy with the climb of his ascent if the feverish look in his face is anything to go by.

"*Finite incantatem,*" Draco whispers. Lucius slumps forward, his hands immediately reaching out to stop himself, finding the hair beneath his fingers and startling back with a gasp. Severus sees the look of intense betrayal, of humiliation in those grey eyes as he looks up at his son.

"Draco," he whispers. He's a fool, Severus thinks, to show any kind of emotion, to say anything, because the Dark Lord howls with bitter laughter, bent at the waist with the utter malicious joy of Lucius' despair.

"Oh, Lucius!" The Dark Lord wipes bloody tears of mirth from his cheeks. "You are a fool! What a jester you would have made in another life!"

"Thank you, my lord," Lucius mumbles, holding long skeins of silver hair in his hands like they are precious. Severus feels a twist of loathing in his gut at Lucius' debasement.

"Draco, dear Draco, the prime and promise of the Malfoys," the Dark Lord caresses Draco's cheek and Narcissa stiffens again. "You have until the end of the term to correct your mistakes and complete your mission. Or the next curse you turn upon your father shall be his last."

Draco's blue eyes are tremulous but he nods, firmly.

"I will not fail you, my Lord," he says.

"Then go," the Dark Lord's caress becomes a playful slap and Draco twists his face obediently, turning the other cheek for his Lord's pleasure just as Bellatrix has always done. Severus feels repulsion rising inside him and remembers what Narcissa said about Bellatrix's growing relationship with her nephew: *she has convinced him there will be glory*. Clearly, Bellatrix has coaxed Severus' godson that the best way to gain the Dark Lord's pleasure is to let him find pleasure in Draco's pain. Today, however, the Dark Lord only smirks, his eyes hardening. Severus remembers how Harrison always characterises the Dark Lord: *like a cat*. When the prey is willing to be subjected, his interest wanes to dislike. Draco is treading a dangerous path. Severus watches as the Dark Lord nods to Cornelius with a satisfied smile and Cornelius nods back, wrapping an arm around Draco's shoulders and manoeuvring him away and out of the door. Draco does not look at either of his parents or his godfather but leans into the Tremblay heir's side. Severus feels a familiar curl of dislike. It's not the first time the Dark Lord has used sexual attraction between his followers to achieve his own ends. Likely, his godson believes in Cornelius' affection because nothing in this life has prepared him for the notion that he could be unwanted. *Foolish, foolish boy*. But Severus does not have time to think about all the ways Draco is bringing pain and destruction down upon himself.

"Severus, with me!" The Dark Lord says, sweeping out of the hall at Malfoy Manor towards the back room. Severus gives Narcissa's hand one final squeeze, steps around the silvery hair puddling around Lucius like shorn sheaves of wheat, and follows the Dark Lord into the

smaller drawing room. The fire is blazing and Nagini is coiled in front of it. Severus sees a hideous bulge in her form and spares a thought for the new peacocks Lucius had shipped from Venice.

“By the day before the solstice,” the Dark Lord says, reaching down to the coffee table and handing Severus a list of potions. Severus peruses it and sees another horrible potion designed to make Lestrage walk and possibly turn him into a serpent, several hideous acid-based potions that will cause terrible disfigurement and enough poly juice potion for a small army. In any other circumstance, Severus would have to tell the client it was impossible to brew all this in just over a month, but luckily, Severus keeps polyjuice potion to hand. It does not make him resent the Dark Lord any less for treating him like a fucking grocer.

“Yes, my lord,” he says.

“A question, my brewer,” the Dark Lord says, throwing himself into a chair by the fire and setting his feet on the table. It is these moments of strange indolence, where the Dark Lord is casual and almost human that are so thoroughly unsettling to Severus. They remind him, vividly, of the days when the Dark Lord wore his human face and seduced Severus with the voracity of his mind and thought. *Would I have followed him if he had been the monster he became and is now?* “What do you know of the elder wand?”

“Nothing, my Lord.” Severus is gratified that it is the truth. “Aside from the old legends.”

“Hmm.” the Dark Lord looks down at the wand in his spidery hand. “I confess, I had considered after my interaction with dear Harry at my resurrection -,” Severus knows he is talking about the graveyard. *The priori incantatem*. “- a new wand could be in order but after this ...”

The Dark Lord flicks his wand lazily and the silvery form of Harrison at the Wizengamot, the wings of the Black magic spread around him, form in the air over the coffee table. It's as if the Dark Lord has it memorised and can produce it at a moment's notice. Severus is highly discomforted by the thought of the Dark Lord privately musing over a memory replication of his child. *Bury that*.

“The raven magic,” Severus says.

“You have not been able to draw it out of him,” the Dark Lord frowns at Harrison's wings.

“Forgive me, my Lord,” Severus says, for perhaps the thousandth time this evening but still he prepares himself for the stinging pain of the cruciatus curse once again.

“I cannot forgive you for your lack of power, Severus,” he says. “I played with Harry with this wand in the Ministry of Magic and even broken then, he suppressed the raven magic or did not feel threatened enough to call it.”

I played with Harry. Those words will be burned into Severus' mind for all eternity. He buries them under a mountain of ice and pushes on.

“Perhaps he was too weak, my Lord,” Severus says.

“Or perhaps my most powerful little weapon requires the world’s most powerful tool to properly encourage him,” the Dark Lord whispers, lifting a finger to run it through the silver of the magic that forms Severus’ son. Then the Dark Lord slowly and thoughtfully licks his finger. Severus stops breathing, just for a second, because he knows that if he breathes he will breathe out the *Ghare Tareaqi* and reveal himself to the Dark Lord with his anger.

Bury it, bury it, bury it. His mother’s voice is inside his head. *Those are the thoughts we kill, Severus, before they can reveal themselves to our enemies and kill us instead.*

“ My Lord?” Severus asks.

“Ask Dumbledore about it,” the Dark Lord smiles. “Let us see what he says. If he says nothing, there is another old fool I can ask, if I must.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Severus bows low.

“Return to your post, brewer.”

Severus nods and back out of the room, still bowing. The main hall of Malfoy Manor has emptied. Narcissa stands in the centre of it, sweeping her wand across the floor, slowly burning up Lucius’ cut hair. Severus hopes it is cathartic for her.

“Draco?” He asks.

“Gone back to school,” Narcissa says.

“Do you know how he got out tonight?”

Narcissa shakes her head.

“I presume it is something to do with his plan,” she murmurs, staring at the blue flames eating silver hair, curling it and blackening it to dust.

“Lucius?”

“Upstairs,” Narcissa says. “With Bellatrix.”

“I return to Hogwarts,” Severus says. Narcissa gives him a particular look and Severus waves his wand, sealing them with a muffliato and then moves closer, holding her hands, so that if anyone enters the hall they will presume that the two of them are speaking sweet nothings to one another, as those members of an extra-marital affair are want to do.

“You need to tell Harrison,” Narcissa whispers.

“Tell him what?” Severus says, for he absolutely will not tell his son about his godson’s ill-fated plan to slay Albus Dumbledore and Severus’ own horrible potential role in it.

“That the net is closing.”

Severus sighs and thinks of his son's eyes when they sat on the beach in Skye after Arthur's funeral: determined and raw and unflinching.

"He knows," Severus whispers. He hates to say it aloud, but Harrison has always known. *Next time, I'm going to fight and win.* Severus hopes he is right.

"And your wolf."

"He knows better than I," Severus snorts quietly. Lupin sends next to daily updates (*I have added to the wards at the house in France, I have asked Griphook to move a significant portion of the Potter vault to the Gringotts in Paris, I have told Kreacher to take Harry's muggle clothes from Spinners End to Venice*). Lupin prepares for war the same way he prepares for an exam or a holiday - endless to-do lists.

"He knows you."

The words hurt more than they should. He thinks of how he told Harrison about Tobias but not Lupin. He remembers his fear that his words would irrevocably change things.

"Some of me," Severus mutters. "Harrison knows about Tobias."

Narcissa looks at him steadily, encouraging him to speak.

"Lupin does not."

"Ah," Narcissa nods. She strokes his wrist and the small scar she knows he still carries from the day he dragged Tobias' body down to Cokeworth river and buried him. "The sins of the fathers, Severus."

"Indeed," Severus sighs and closes his eyes. *I will tell him. One day.*

"You will keep your promise to me about Draco?" Narcissa's eyes are very blue.

"I will." Severus nods and looks around them. "But I cannot help Draco if he continues to hide his plans from us. I cannot ... step in if I do not know the path ahead."

Narcissa nods and sighs.

"I will take it to the glass," she murmurs. Severus swallows hard. He knows she takes great risks scrying in Malfoy Manor whilst the Dark Lord is back in residence, even in the warded and ancient dungeon room. He hadn't realised it, but since Narcissa agreed to take the post at Hogwarts he has been anxious to remove her there, to know she is at least afforded some modicum of safety, especially since Antonin continues to press (and be forcefully rejected) in his teenage suit of pleasure against her. Clearly, being the blessed recipient of the first sexual encounter with Narcissa Black ruins a man for life.

"Will you come to Hogwarts tonight?" He asks quietly. He has not invited Narcissa to sleep in his quarters in all the time he has lived at Hogwarts but he cannot stop himself. "Or would you like to stay here, at home?"

Narcissa looks bleakly around Malfoy Manor, her eyes the colour of misted seagrass.

“This is not a home, not anymore,” she burns the last of Lucius’ hair. “But I will stay with my husband.”

Severus hears her unspoken words: *For now.*

“Mr Malfoy?” Albus asks, as soon as Severus walks into his office. Albus is seated by the fire with his phoenix on his lap and his slippers on an ottoman. He looks absurdly relaxed and Severus feels a flush of resentment that he had to spend most of his evening in pain on the floor whilst Albus sat in comfort.

“Yes.” Severus doesn’t wait for Albus to offer him a seat before sinking into the armchair opposite him. “The Dark Lord has given him a deadline.”

“And given us one too, then,” Albus muses. He does not seem at all worried but as Severus looks at his dying hand, the necrotic skin that is slowly flaking away, he realises that Albus is already living on a deadline. “What else?”

“The Elder wand.”

Albus’ blackened hand pushes where it strokes the absurd plume on the top of the phoenix’s head.

“Did Harry ask about it?”

“No.” Severus narrows his eyes. *Why would my child ask about the elder wand?* Then Severus remembers that Remus wrote to him about his child’s change of reading habits towards mythology in the summer. “The Dark Lord.”

“Ah.” Albus leans forward. “Exactly what did he say?”

“He asked me to ask you about the Elder wand. He said that if you said nothing, there is another old fool he can ask.”

“Hmm,” Albus stares into the fire. “Tell him ... Gregorovitch.”

“Gregorovitch? The Wandmaker?”

“Indeed.” Clearly, Albus has no qualms about sending the Dark Lord on the trail of a wandmaker he does not know. “Anything else?”

Severus thinks about his godson compelling Lucius to kneel and cut his hair. Albus will not care.

“Nothing.”

“Then goodnight, Severus.”

“That’s it?” Severus stares at Albus. “The horcruxes?”

“What of them?”

“You have been absent,” Severus glares at him. “You are working towards their end?”

“I am.”

“And might you perhaps wish to include me? To utilise my help?” Severus presses, finding that even when he thinks he has uncovered many of the great secrets of Albus Dumbledore, here the man is, finding ways to hide things from him again. “Since I am bound by my word to secure their downfall.”

“All I require of you, Severus, is that you keep your word,” Albus says easily. Severus stares at him but doesn’t know why he expected more. He rises.

“The net is closing, Albus,” he says sharply.

“Ah, yes, it is indeed,” Albus tents his fingers. “But around whom?”

Severus finds he does not much care. The net, by his reckoning, is vast and closing around them all. It barely matters if the object is the Dark Lord or Albus, they will all be caught in the net.

“It will not be Harrison,” Severus says sharply. He turns and walks out and shakes the feeling that he has tempted fate.

When Severus returns to his quarters, he’s surprised to find his son sitting awake on the sofa in his pyjamas, playing a card game with the elf. Severus sees chamomile tea on the table and knows that means his child has had a nightmare. Harrison has been doing this more often since their conversation last week. Severus is privately touched by it. Harrison takes one look at the way he’s walking and says:

“Tom?”

“Yes,” Severus sits heavily down in his chair, wincing. Harrison rises and picks a second mug from the drying rack. He pours from the teapot and gives the mug to Severus before sitting back down and pulling a blanket over his legs.

“Was it alright?” Harrison asks. “Dammit!”

“Kreacher wins!” The elf cackles, claiming what looks like sweets on top of a card.

“Are you playing New Market with Malteasers?” Severus smirks.

“Master is losing Market game with chocolate balls,” Kreacher cackles. “Master is a terrible gambler!”

“It’s because you’re a fucking cheater!”

“Language, Harrison.”

“Language, Master,” Kreacher chuckles darkly.

“Oh eff you,” Harrison scowls, pulling a bag of Malteasers out from under the blanket and beginning to pelt them at the elf’s hand. “You effing little -,”

This only makes Kreacher cackle louder as he opens his mouth wide like a hippo to catch them.

“I believe this conversation has become unproductive,” Severus sighs and waves his wand so that the bag of Malteasers flies into his hand. Severus absently takes one and crunches it slowly, sighing. He is both hungry and entirely without appetite, the way he only ever is when he has spent hours in the presence of the Dark Lord. “You should go to bed.”

Harrison gives him a long look.

“Is there anything I need to know?” He asks evenly. Severus thinks of everything Narcissa said and then nods. He sets the Malteasers down on the table and takes a sip of his chamomile tea.

“Your father has told you that he has moved all of the clothes out of Spinners End?”

“Yeah, all of my stuff’s in Venice,” Harrison frowns. “Voldemort’s not going after Remus again, is he?”

“No,” Severus shakes his head and wonders how to word what he must say. “You understand why he has arranged that?”

“Yeah, in case we have to run,” Harrison lays down his cards in his lap, turning his attention completely to Severus. “Is ... that what’s happening?”

“Not immediately,” Severus sees Harrison’s shoulders relax. “But ... soon.”

“How soon?”

Too fucking soon.

“It is possible that you will not be able to return in January,” Severus says flatly. Harrison stares down at his hands. Severus thinks that his eyes are lingering on his Slytherin/Peverell ring.

“You think Dumbledore will be dead by then? The curse is that bad?”

Severus does not want to lie to Harrison and he has promised that he will not, but he will also not reveal Draco’s task, as he promised Lupin.

“I think he might be dead by then,” Severus confirms. *At Draco’s hand, or possibly my own.* Harrison lets out a long breath.

“And you’ll stay here?” He asks quietly. Severus thinks he feels a light pull on his Prince tether.

“I will maintain my cover,” Severus says. *I will do what I must do to keep you and your father alive.* Harrison nods and lays a card.

“But you can always find me, right?” Harrison looks at him with gimlet green eyes and Severus definitely feels a tightening in the tethers between them. Severus does not want to think about the ticking clock that the Dark Lord has put on their time together. He wants to think about this, about his son sitting on his sofa, safe and calm and talking to him so easily. Trusting him.

“Yes, *farzandam*,” Severus sips his tea and, very consciously, tries to pull on his own tether. It’s something Harrison does with ease and Severus is only able to achieve by focusing on the cold stars and emptiness of the Prince ring. The tether between him and his son, shimmers into visibility between them, dark and shadowed, and Harrison smiles. “I can always find you.”

•

- - - - -

Gwion,

I shall be joining the Hogwarts staff at the start of December. I have several books I shall bring you and I have arranged with our mutual friend to make use of your teaching skills. I hear you are a talented Potions Apprentice. I would like you to cover some of the first year classes, if you are amenable.

Yours in counsel,

Lady Macbeth

My Lady,

I shall happily cover the first years for you. I look forward to learning from your skill first hand.

Yours in studentship,

Gwion

- - - - -

Dear Lady Black, (I understand this is your preferred mode of address),

In anticipation of your first day tomorrow, I hope you can make use of these textbooks I utilised in the teaching of the first, second and third years in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

I understand the nature of your subterfuge, but if I find that you are endangering Severus with your betrayal of your husband, I will no longer be understanding.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Remus Lupin

Runes Scholar and Creature Counsellor of the Congregation, Venice.

Dear Dr Lupin,

Thank you for the books, they will be most helpful. I must say, this is the most delicately worded threat I have ever received. I must congratulate you on its elegance. Rest assured, ours is a fragile alliance and I have no intention of endangering it or your lover. He remains, quite firmly, yours.

Yours faithfully,

Lady Black,

Runes Scholar and Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions, Hogwarts.

Dear Lady Black,

I am gratified by your assurance. I have included my lesson plans from 1993/94. I think they are still applicable to the syllabus. Good luck.

Dr Remus Lupin.

- - - - -

Hermione's being weird.

I noticed.

With you too?

No, with me, she is being borderline suspicious and downright rude.

She thinks we're keeping secrets.

Well, we are.

About Slughorn.

That too.

Are Blaise and Daphne being weird too?

Blaise knows. His mother told him. Daphne doesn't care so she hasn't asked. She's excited about having a female Potions Professor.

How's teaching first years going? Do they call you Professor Nott?

No.

What do they call you?

Nott.

Are they scared of you?

Of course not.

They totally are. You're so fit.

Shut up, Potter.

Make me, Professor Nott.

“You’re trying to stretch the bond?” Magnus asks quietly under the roar of the Quidditch match. Magnus and Fred and George Weasley have managed to come up to Hogwarts for a the Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Theo does not understand how they have managed it, perhaps the Weasley twins bribed the headmaster with a new sweet they have invented, but he finds he doesn’t care. He’s perfectly happy to sit in the stands with the Ravenclaws (Blaise thinks it is the only way not to incite a riot) and talk to Magnus Bane.

“I’m practicing, *we’re* practicing,” Theo says. “Do you know if anyone’s done it like this before?”

“No,” Magnus says and it’s a little bit devastating. Theo has been hoping that Magnus Bane, the half-Mage, would be able to provide something, anything that will help him navigate the uniqueness of his situation. It’s the first weekend in December and has been over a month since Theo starting trying to get Harry to practise stretching it with him. “Theodore, that we know of, there has never been a bond like this.”

“But Merlin -,”

“Bonded Arthur and his lover this way, not himself,” Magnus’ voice is a soft whisper. “Not himself.”

Theo sighs and watches the Quidditch game, absently thinking that the notion that anyone finds people chasing around balls in air interesting utterly baffling.

“But Merlin and Morgana, they were bonded unusually even if it wasn’t the same,” he whispers. “What of Shelley and Dee?”

“Ah. Yes. Sometimes they could ... imitate the kind of bond you have,” Magnus says. “When Edward was imprisoned, for instance, they could communicate across the divide between nations but only when in the throes of scrying.”

Theo tucks that thought away for another time.

“Why are you practicing stretching it, Theo?” Magnus asks.

“Because ...” Theo swallows. “If we’re apart, if we’re ... separated, I need to be able to do this. Even with our journals. I have to learn.”

“I see,” Magnus’ eyes are full of knowing. “How can I help you?”

“How do I make it ... easier?”

“What makes it easier now?”

“Physical proximity,” Theo whispers. “It’s harder for me. I think ... I think if he really tried, if he was in control of his feelings, he could send his emotions to me over any distance -,”

“And thoughts?”

“Only when we’re close, when we’re ... close enough to touch,” Theo says, but he’s distracted by Harry’s voice on the other side of Fred Weasley.

“Hermione, I am trying to watch the fucking game will you please just -,”

“I know you’re hiding something from me, I know you know what happened with Slughorn -,”

Theo sighs inwardly. Granger will not be deterred forever. They will have to tell her about Slughorn, about the horcruxes and Harry wants to, but Theo is still struggling to even think about what he uncovered in his Professor’s memories. He cannot imagine speaking of it to Granger. He knows Harry also has his reservations: *how can I tell my best friend in the fucking world that Tom Riddle is basically unbeatable?*

“Thoughts are more complicated, they require more direction and what I know of Harry is that he doesn’t always know *what* he’s thinking -,” Magnus begins.

“GRYFFINDOR SCORES!” The commentator, who irritatingly is Finnegan, bellows.

“YES!” Harry yells, jumping to his feet. “Go, Dean!”

“AWESOME!” Fred Weasley screams, also jumping to his feet and jostling Harry excitedly. “Ginny’s boyfriend is *brilliant!*”

“This Peakes is pretty good,” George comments, clapping loudly.

“Congratulations, *amore*,” Blaise says, clapping next to Harry with a polite smile.

“Harry!” Granger pulls him back down. “You’ve been weird ever since Slughorn left -,”

“Hermione, will you stop? Ron’s trying to save!”

“Yes, and the Ravenclaws are looking,” Blaise says lightly, taking hold of Harry’s hand.

“I’m not looking,” Lovegood says breezily. She’s sitting on the other side of Magnus. “I’m watching Ronald. He’s doing very well.”

“Yes, he is,” Harry grins, standing back up. “Watch this roll, Fred, watch this roll, we’ve been practising - YES, RON! YES!”

“Perfect!” Fred exclaims.

“Oh shit, I think Ginny’s seen the snitch!” George yells, lurching to his feet. Theo takes the opportunity of everyone surging up and gasping as Harry shouts instructions about the firebolt into the sky.

“Lean to the left, lean to the fucking LEFT!”

“What can I do?” Theo asks Magnus quietly. “To make thoughts easier to send?”

“You are an occlumens, Theodore,” Magnus whispers back. “You know how to use your own mind in extraordinary ways. Harry is driven by his emotions, his magic like my own is almost entirely based on will, but you have *faith*, Theodore, and that is a powerful thing -,”

“Hermione, I can’t talk about this right now!” Harry says loudly. “Ah, fuck! So close, Ginny, SO CLOSE!”

“Oh, you can’t talk to me, but you can talk to other people?” Granger demands. Theo sees the way she catches his eye behind Harry’s back.

“Mi, please, I swear to God,” Harry says, sitting down and pressings his face into his hands. Theo knows he cannot keep sitting here. Not if Granger is going to be like this. They might all say something they regret.

“I’ve got to go,” Theo says to Magnus. “I’m supposed to meet Professor Malfoy.”

“Good idea,” Magnus says quietly and then calls. “Harry! Come and sit with me, Mr Nott is leaving.”

Theo stands up as Harry switches places. In the movement, his hand brushes against Theo’s robes and it’s enough. Theo feels Harry’s thoughts pushed through the bond.

Are you okay?

Yes, Theo thinks back firmly. Control your temper.

I will.

“As I said, Mr Nott,” Magnus says, standing up and putting a hand on his shoulder, giving him a smile. “Utilise the gifts you already have.”

Theo nods and is actually grateful to be leaving the Quidditch stands. He should just do what Daphne does and refuse to watch it. He is just beginning his ascent back up towards the castle, bundling his scarf around his neck to protect himself from the frosty December breeze, when someone falls into step beside him.

“Nott, can I talk to you?” FitzTremblay asks nervously.

“As I walk, please, FitzTremblay, I have a meeting with Professor Malfoy,” Theo says, walking swiftly up the hill past the greenhouses. “What’s the matter?”

“Rosier,” Fitz blurts out. “He wants me to be the Yaxley heir and swear to the Dark Lord.”

Theo stops and stares at Fitz-Tremblay. Part of him cannot believe that the Dark Lord would ever try to bring a child so young into his service but Theo knows more of the Dark Lord now than he ever has before. Pureblood society values children enough to protect them but the Dark Lord does not.

“In here,” Theo says, jerking his head towards Greenhouse three and they step inside. Sahara is there, in the stifling warmth, and instantly loops herself down from the hanging vines, hissing happily to Theo which Theo interprets vaguely as threats of vengeance against all of the rodents in the greenhouse.

“Wow,” Fitz breathes. “This is the snake that likes Harry, right?”

“He’s a parselmouth, it was inevitable,” Theo says, stroking her scales.

“Can I touch her?” Fitz asks reverently.

“Yes.”

Theo watches as Fitz, eyes wide, strokes Sahara’s green scales.

“So. Rosier.” Theo begins, once he has seen Fitz’s rapid breath soften as he gazes at the serpent. “Why are you talking to me about Rosier?”

“Because you’re ... you,” Fitz says with a slight frown. “You’ve taken a treaty from Hilary Lee, haven’t you?”

“How do you know that?”

“We’re friends,” Fitz rolls his eyes. “In Gobstones club. Anyway, you and Zabini, you’re stopping Rosier from taking over, right? Because you don’t want to be a Death Eater or be murdered by the Dark Lord?”

“I do not want either of those things,” Theo says reasonably.

“Neither do I,” Fitz says fervently. “I don’t want to be Yaxley’s heir, I’ve never even met him, my Mum always said he was creepy but she’s not sure what to do and I ...” Fitz swallows heavily. “I don’t want the Dark Lord to kill my Mum.”

Theo stares at Fitz.

“Your brother,” Theo says quietly.

“Half brother,” Fitz says mulishly.

“Tremblay, he’s ... suggested this?”

Fitz nods, his eyes bleak.

“Cornelius sent a message through his *boyfriend* -” Fitz shudders. “- Malfoy, and then Rosier told me what to do, that I should just accept the heirship and everything will be fine but he doesn’t *know* about my no wands treaty with Harry and ...” Fitz swallows hard. “He knows stuff. About my family.”

“I will not ask but ... you have my confidence.”

“I have a twin sister,” Fitz whispers. “She’s a squib. She’s ... we’ve hidden her. Somewhere she’s safe.”

Suddenly, the unlikely friendship between Fitz-Tremblay and Hilary Lee makes much more sense. Two children who have both witnessed first hand how the pureblood culture of Britain exorcises and ignores their own.

“Cornelius must have told Rosier,” Fitz’s eyes are glossy with rage and betrayal. “They must have told the Dark Lord. He’ll hurt her, right? If I don’t do what they say?”

“It’s possible.”

“But if I become Yaxley’s heir and I’m the Dark Lord’s servant then he ...” Fitz swallows painfully. “What if he asks me to kill my sister? He could, couldn’t he?”

Theo nods without hesitation.

“You’re sure?” Fitz whispers.

“He killed my mother,” Theo says steadily. “I am sure.”

Something changes in Fitz’ face.

“That’s why it has to be you,” Fitz mutters, cupping Sahara’s head. “That’s why it’s got to be *you* and not Harry or Zabini -,”

“If you’re talking about a treaty, a bear wands treaty or a no wands treaty with the house of Nott will not protect you from Yaxley naming you -,”

“I don’t want a treaty, I want you to make me your Ward,” Fitz says abruptly. Theo stares. *What the fuck?*

“Wardships are for orphans,” Theo says. “I am a ward of Lord Greengrass -,”

“And you’re protected by him,” Fitz says eagerly. “You *have* to vote neutral because he has to guide you until your old enough, even though it’s what you want, isn’t it? To have a neutral house?”

What I want is to destroy the Dark Lord with the love of my life by my side, Theo thinks dazedly and then wonders where the thought has come from.

“Yes,” he says. “A neutral house, different from what my father built, but I am not a Lord -,”

“You will be next weekend,” Fitz says. “Harry won’t be a Lord until next summer and if I’m Harry’s ward then they’ll kill my family anyway and Zabini is European and his mum is a creature who might live forever, I *can’t* be his ward and Lord Greengrass already has you -,”

“Fitz,” Theo says gently, stopping the stream of words. “You are not an orphan.”

“I don’t have to be, only *heirs* have to be orphans to be made wards.” Fitz’ eyes gleam.

“Lords in the Sacred Twenty Eight can make wards of any child from a magical home if the ward requests it personally as long as they’re *not* an heir to a house. I looked it up. I’m not an heir.”

“That clause was made for the inclusion of bastards,” Theo says. “For Lord’s who wished to include their bastard children in their house, you may not be an heir to a house but you *have* a father and he has a Wizengamot seat, society dictates that you can be no other ward but his.”

Fitz’ eyes harden suddenly.

“Society doesn’t dictate shit,” he snaps. “*Society* dictates that my father claim only *one* of his bastards and he claimed Cornelius and Cornelius is Heir Tremblay and Heir Lestrangle and I’m *nobody*. I don’t have a father to claim me.”

“You might feel like that -,”

“It’s a fact,” Fitz spits out. “I’m only called Fitz-Tremblay at school because Mum asked him, begged him for this one thing, for his name so that I could have some kind of pureblood English-sounding name because she knew I’d sort Slytherin and I’d have to deal with my fucking half brother all the time. Lord Tremblay gave it to her, but only if she took his name off everything to do with me and my sister and never, ever ask for anything again. He made her sign stuff at Gringotts, me too, I had to go and watch him ...” Fitz’ voice breaks and he shakes his head. “He’s a bastard.”

“So your father disowned you?” Theo says slowly. Fitz nods.

“I know it’s not about me,” Fitz says softly. “It’s about my sister. But that makes it worse. We’re so alike, her and me. We’re the same in every way, we like the same books, we’ve got the same sense of humour, we even look the same. She just ... doesn’t have magic. And for that, he doesn’t give a shit about all of us. He’ll never give a shit. He wishes we had never been born. I hate him for that. I’ll hate him as long as I live.”

Theo stares at him.

“What’s her name?” Theo asks softly. Fitz stares at him and then his mouth forms a gentle smile.

“Vida,” he says. “Zevida.”

“And you are Nathaniel?”

“Nate and Vida,” Fitz whispers. “That’s us.”

“Your mother’s name?”

“Davydova,” Fitz says softly. *Zevida and Nathaniel Davydova*. Theo cannot imagine how difficult it would have been for young Fitz, bastard child of Lord Tremblay, to appear at school carrying his mother’s name only and be sorted into the one house where your name is what matters the most.

“Russian?”

“Czech,” Fitz shakes his head. “Not that anyone cares.”

“I do.”

Fitz gives him a sudden, fierce look.

“Will you do it?” He asks. “Will you be my Lord?”

Theo opens his mouth. *Yes. Yes. Yes.* Yet he holds himself back.

“Let me speak with Zabini,” Theo says quietly. *Let me speak to Harry*. “But I promise I will think on it.”

“I thought you might say that,” Fitz nods. “You have an alliance, don’t you? You and him and Greengrass?”

“We do.”

Fitz nods reflectively.

“It’s good that you do,” he says quietly. “It helps.”

Theo doesn’t have to ask what it helps.

“Things are going to get really bad,” Fitz says quietly as Sahara winds herself around his arm, hissing about hatchlings.

“How do you know that?”

“Because Cornelius is sure they’re going to get good for him,” Fitz scowls. “Good for Cornelius is terrible for me.”

“For all of us, probably.”

“Yep,” Fitz smirks. “I’m sorry, Nott, I’ve kept you from Professor Malfoy.”

“Yes, I must go,” Theo hesitates and looks at Fitz. “Whatever I decide, you can always come to me. I will try to protect you, where I can.”

“Thank you but it’s hard to protect someone against their own family,” Fitz says glumly.

Too fucking right it is, Theo thinks fiercely. Doesn’t mean I won’t bloody try.

“Hard is not impossible,” Theo says, opening the greenhouse door. As it closes, he thinks he sees Fitz smile at Sahara in relief.

“Come in,” Narcissa says, holding the door open to Theo. It’s strange to see her in the quarters that were occupied by Slughorn. It is very different. She has clearly had it magically altered, shrunk down to a more convenient less imposing space suited for brewing and preparing teaching. He is instantly comforted by the scent of the draught of peace brewing by the window. “Would you like tea?”

“Yes please.”

Theo watches as Narcissa takes a kettle from the small burner next to her brew. It’s immensely calming, he realises, watching her pour water into a pot, stir it and then place a strainer over each cup before pouring. It reminds him of his mother.

“It is a lavender earl grey,” she says quietly when she hands him the cup and saucer. “A lovely blend of leaves.”

She gestures for him to sit in one of the velvet arm chairs in front of the small fire, the coffee table that is also a chessboard between them. Theo does and takes a sip of the tea.

“It’s beautiful,” he says, thinking of the different tisanes his mother enjoyed.

“Very light,” she says.

“Yes,” Theo agrees absently, looking down at the chess-set. “This is a lovely carving.”

“Gwion.” Theo looks up from the chess pieces. “What is unsettling you?”

It's strange, hearing that name on her lips. It's been months of writing letters back and forth and he realises, suddenly, that he trusts Narcissa. He could tell her about his complicated feelings with regards to Apollonius, his rage over the notion that perhaps Slughorn had similar hopes with himself, he could tell her about Rosier always watching him and what Harry shared with his Sire for the first time and now, Harry seems to trust him more than ever and Theo is worried about that because of Narcissa's own son. He could tell her about Granger's disappointment, about trying to stretch the bond, about the baffling and terrifying notion of horcruxes and all of it but he realises that is none of it is what is really unsettling him at this precise moment.

"Fitz Tremblay wants to be my ward when I become Lord Nott," he sighs. He thinks he sees a flicker of triumph in Narcissa's blue eyes but she merely inclines her head, as if she finds this totally unexpected.

"He is a sensible child," Narcissa sips her tea slowly. "Yaxley has designs upon him that no doubt young Rosier hopes to enforce."

"Yes. I strive towards neutral ground with Zabini and Greengrass, but I do not know if I can take a Ward."

"That is not accurate, you *know* that you can," Narcissa corrects gently. "but perhaps the fact that you do not know if you *will* is the true root of your disquiet."

Theo doesn't know if he has ever felt this with an adult; being known and predicted and understood. It makes him slightly uncomfortable, as if he has been exposed in a way he didn't expect. Another part of him is intensely grateful.

"Harry might have to run one day," Theo says slowly, repeating what Harry heard from Snape recently. "Soon."

The thought has been waking Theo up with night sweats. *What the hell am I going to do?*

"Yes," Narcissa nods. It's crushing to hear it from her lips in some ways, but he knows she wouldn't lie to him.

"Making FitzTremblay my Ward won't protect him if ... if I disappear with Harry." Theo swallows and speaks the worst truth. "I ... don't know what to do."

Narcissa gives him a long steady look and then sets her tea cup down.

"I think you do," Narcissa she says quietly. "You are perhaps afraid of what you want to do and how it will impact Harry."

Theo stares at her because she is right. He knows what he wants to do. He's known it since Hilary Lee took his bear wands treaty at Halloween.

"I don't know how to tell him," Theo whispers. "I was the one who ... who protested our separation in the summer."

“And you have grown since then, have you not, Sorcerer?” Narcissa says quietly. Theo stares up at her. They have never used that word in this way before either but it feels right to hear it from Narcissa, the same way it feels right to hear it from Lovegood.

“You know,” he swallows. “The glass?”

She smiles. Theo admires how opaque her smiles are; he never knows entirely what they mean.

“There are patterns in history,” she murmurs. “Patterns in magic. A mage, a Sorcerer, and a Fae. You are something more than a consort. I told you once that if he veiled himself from you then ...”

“He will never be himself and I will never be myself,” Theo nods. These are the words that helped him reach Harry in the summer, that set him on this path to accepting his role as Lord Nott. “Yes.”

“There are patterns,” Narcissa repeats. “I see them in the ripples. You cannot defer from your path or you will never be yourself.”

I will never be the Sorcerer if I don't stay behind. Theo feels the truth of it settle inside him but still, his mind desperately seeks out proof, a rational reasoning to understand it.

“Do you know what my path is?” He asks quietly. “Have you seen it?”

“I see shadows,” Narcissa shifts. “But some things do not need to be seen in the glass. I know that if you take Fitz-Tremblay under your wardship the Minister for Magic will not let it go without comment. As soon as you take your Lordship, you will be a target.”

Theo notices how she doesn't call Lucius Malfoy her husband.

“I have prepared myself for it,” Theo says.

“It will be worse than you think,” Narcissa says flatly.

“Do you know what he has planned?”

“No, and I do not see it in the glass,” Narcissa shakes her head. “But I will always watch.”

“Thank you.” Theo hesitates. “Do you see Harry's path?”

Narcissa's face is utterly unreadable but if Theo had to guess, he would reckon that her placid expression was possibly guarded.

“There is much that is confused and unknown,” she says gently. Theo does not find that comforting at all.

“Will you stay?” He asks quietly. *If Harry has to run, what will happen to you?*

Narcissa shrugs magnificently.

“I will go where I am permitted,” her eyes are bleak. “But your letters will always find me, Gwion.”

Those words, however, do comfort him.

“I do not know what to do next,” Theo confesses quietly. Narcissa leans down and gently traces a finger across the chess board.

“That is because it is not your move. You can only face what comes.” She gently knocks down the white king and lays it on its side, respectfully. Her blue eyes settle on Theo’s, full of meaning. She smiles, shortly. “Trust in your bond, Mr Nott.”

Theo stares at the white king lying on its side and suddenly understands who it is that Draco Malfoy has been tasked with murdering: *it’s Dumbledore*.

“Yes, Professor Malfoy,” Theo whispers.

The Net is Closing

Chapter Notes

This book is about trauma. Pay close attention to the tags. Mention of rape.

This time, Harry and Theo plan for what's coming.

IMPORTANT NOTE: I am going on hiatus for mental health reasons. It will likely be a couple of months. Further details are shared on the discord post on my Instagram. You can find both in the end notes for this chapter.

*** EDIT JULY 2023 ***

I know it has been a couple of months so I feel I owe you all an update. I am writing the end of this book, but very slowly, as is needed to suit my mental health. However it is all outlined, it is in progress, and it will be back on AO3 in Jan 2024 with weekly updates until the series is complete by the start of 2025. If you want to keep up with me writing, more details about my process and regular updates are available through discord, instagram and my website in the endnotes.

“Is he okay?” Harry asks quietly, watching Theo climb down out of the stands. Magnus shrugs gently and glances towards Hermione.

“You’re keeping secrets, HP.”

“Always,” Harry shrugs. Harry knows she’s upset, he wants to make her feel better and tell her everything, but how can he tell her the truth? The news about the horcruxes has been a heavy blow that Harry keeps feeling every time his mind drifts to them. It reminds him, horribly, of how it felt in third year when he first learned about Sirius and thought he had killed his parents. The torture of it, of having a persistent nasty thought that his mind constantly returned to, is something Harry has not missed. *Fucking soul-bits*. As if Tom wasn’t enough of a dickface already, he had to go and tether himself to life. *It’s just fucking rude is what it is*.

“I heard a rumour from the Contessa about the nature of Professor Slughorn’s retirement.” Magnus hesitates. “One can insinuate that without a current student to press charges against him, evidence of a past misdemeanour was revealed.”

“Yes.” Harry mutters, scouring the sky for the snitch. He sees it next to the Slytherin goalposts and feels a twinge. *Could have had it*. “Tom.”

Here’s another thing that’s hard for Harry to think about. Tom, young and his age and so much better at lying than Harry is but not good enough to hide in his muscles and eyes how

much Slughorn's touch disgusted him. Harry's mind keeps popping back to Severus' words on the night he found out: *I have seen the Dark Lord rape countless others*. Voldemort became so many terrible things but Harry wonders how much of *this* terrible thing was created by what Slughorn did.

"Hmm," Magnus sighs and his eyes glitter. "It is hard, sometimes, not to wonder what could have been if Thomas Riddle had been loved as a child."

"Yeah, it is." Harry watches as Draco swoops past with Ginny on his tail. Draco's faking. The snitch is over by the Gryffindor stands. It feels like cheating to yell where it is but he wants to, very much. He glares at it and wonders if it's possible to compel a snitch into flying into Ginny's line of sight. *No compulsions*. Harry tries to distract himself from his jealousy. *I really need to learn how to fucking shapeshift*. "Is that what you two were talking about?"

"No, we were talking about the bond."

"Yeah, he's been ... kinda obsessed with it lately," Harry frowns. Theo's making him practise every night. Harry doesn't really understand the sense of urgency.

"You've been practicing stretching it?"

"He told you that?"

Harry's surprised by that. Theo's pretty secretive and it seems unlikely that he'd just say something to Magnus on the cuff at a Quidditch match of all places.

"I came today to talk to him about it," Magnus nods. "We have been corresponding."

That's news to Harry. He feels a little tremble of disquiet. *Is Theo okay?*

"Since when?" Harry asks softly.

"Since Halloween."

Harry nods thoughtfully, thinking over that weekend in October. There was the party and Theo's treaty with Hilary Lee and Harry getting drunk on punch and weird magic ... then there was the forest and the bird wings and Luna. Harry can't put a finger on what happened that weekend that would prompt Theo to write to Magnus.

"Do you think it's a good idea?" Harry asks, not joining in as Fred and George launch to their feet, gasping as Ginny begins a huge, fast dive and swoop around the pitch. Harry sees the fluttering of golden wings and feels pretty confident the firebolt will get her there before Malfoy. "Trying to use the bond like this? For ... communication and stuff?"

"I think if you anticipate a time when you will soon be apart, it's a very useful skill."

Harry frowns.

"Why would we be apart?" He mutters as people begin to scream wildly. Ginny's close to the snitch, she'll have it in a minute. *Flatten your legs*, Harry thinks absently at her, even though

he knows it makes no difference.

“Harry, I’m not moving gold to France for nothing,” Magnus raises his eyebrows. “Haven’t they spoken to you?”

Harry knows that when Magnus says ‘they’ he means Remus and Severus.

“No, I get that, but ...” Harry watches Ginny stretch out her fingers. “I wouldn’t be going ... without *him*, right?”

Why would I go without Theo?

“Talk to him, Harry,” Magnus says quietly. “All I can say is that it might be necessary. For all of us.”

Ginny catches the snitch, barrel rolling up into the air above the goal posts to tremendous uproar. Harry makes a good show of lurching to his feet and screaming his approval so people don’t think that his mind is actually racing over the implications of Magnus’ words.

Harry watches as the players descend to the pitch and celebrate. Harry waves down at Ron and Ginny and sees the moment both of them spot their big brothers in the stands and go wild with excitement. Harry smiles fondly. Even from this distance, he can feel Draco’s cold stare directed at him. Harry looks away.

“Are you staying?” Blaise is asking Fred and Harry turns his attention to his friends instead.

“What do you think, Magnus?” Fred asks him.

“I’ve got a martini with my name on it at the Three Broomsticks,” Magnus says, pressing a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Owl me if you need me, HP.”

“Sure, Mags.” Harry quickly embraces Magnus, taking a deep breath of his frankincense scent. *Why would it be necessary for everyone that I leave Theo behind?* Harry won’t do it.

“We’ll meet you there in two hours,” George says to Magnus. “We’ve a Gryffindor party to crash first.”

“Heir Potter, will you walk me down to the gate?” Magnus asks Hermione, unexpectedly. “We have some matters of elemental magic to discuss.”

“Oh, yes,” Hermione looks flustered for a moment and then flattered. “I’ve been practising but yes, it’d be good to talk about it, I have some questions.”

“I am at your disposal,” Magnus offers her his arm. Hermione hesitates. She shoots Harry a sort of pleading look which Harry completely understands. *Don’t shut me out*, the look begs. Harry remembers Hermione’s letter from when he was in Skye and refusing to answer his mail: *Don’t leave me in this shit alone, Harry. Please. Don’t.* He realises how much he doesn’t want to have to tell her the truth. That Voldemort might be unbeatable and this might be his last month at Hogwarts. The second is a thought he’s been trying really hard not to let into his consciousness because it seems impossible. Hogwarts has never been a super easy

place for Harry to live but without it, what is there? Without Severus and Hermione and, fucking Christ above, *Theo*, what is there? Harry sighs heavily but nods slightly.

“We can talk later,” Harry says quietly. “After.”

The relief in Hermione’s features is obvious. He will tell her everything and he’ll have to do it soon, but not right now. Magnus is clearly giving him time to find Theo. Harry needs to find Theo because a question is slowly burning its way to the front of his mind: *Why does Theo think he’s leaving me?*

“I’ll walk you both to the gates when you leave,” Blaise says easily to Fred and George and Harry knows he’s planning a quick rendezvous with Fred. “I’ll meet you in the entrance hall?”

“Yep,” Fred gives Blaise a flicker of a wink and with Luna, they all begin to descend the Quidditch stands.

“I don’t really understand Quidditch,” Luna says dreamily. “There are too many wrackspurts in the way to really see what’s going on.”

“A common problem,” Blaise clicks his tongue sympathetically. Luna’s ferret is wearing a mini version of her Gryffindor lion hat. “And what is the *furetto*’s name today?”

“Morgana,” Luna says. Harry nearly trips over his own feet. Fred shoots out a hand to steady him.

“Alright there, milord?”

“Yeah, grand,” Harry mutters and shoots Luna a quizzical look but she simply gives him a wide, benign smile. *What the fuck Luna?* “Something you need to tell me, huh?”

Luna responds by gently reaching out and holding his hand. Hidden underneath his sleeve, Harry can feel the golden magic inside his bones rising to meet the green leaves of Luna’s magic. She smells like a fresh waterfall and Harry sighs, trying to relax.

“Trust us,” Luna says gently. Harry knows what she means. *Trust the three of us, trust the bond.*

“I’ll try,” Harry says curtly. It’s easier to trust in the idea of the three of them being some kind of magically ordained team when Theo isn’t thinking of fucking off and letting Harry leave Hogwarts alone.

“Do you want to go and see the unicorns?” Luna squeezes his hands fondly.

“I’d love to see unicorns,” Blaise grins.

“I thought unicorns didn’t like boys,” George says.

“Everything likes me,” Blaise shrugs and Harry snorts with laughter.

“Sure, let’s go,” Harry says and grins at Fred and George. “Do you guys want to see Blaise get kicked in the head by a unicorn before you go to the party?”

“As fun as that might be ...” Fred grins at Blaise.

“Can we have a chat, milord?” George asks, jerking his head towards the entrance to the tunnel where the House changing rooms are.

“Okay,” Harry looks at Blaise. “See you later?”

Blaise nods and politely offers Luna his arm.

“Can I escort you and Morgana the noble *furetto* to the castle, Lovegood? Perhaps via some unicorns?”

“You can indeed, sweet blooded child,” Luna says dreamily. Harry thinks he sees Blaise’s eyebrows nearly disappear they shoot up so high. “If you like unicorns you’d love Heliopaths.”

“Heliopaths?”

“Yes, do you have Heliopaths in Italy?”

“I don’t think there has been a heliopath citing since the time of Aristotle,” Blaise looks so baffled with this sudden change of direction and Harry snorts. It’s very Luna to combine a quick, insightful truth about a person with nonsense. “If they even exist at all.”

“That recently? How exciting!”

Harry smirks and watches them walk away before turning to Fred and George, who are congratulating Peakes and Demelza as they come out of the tunnel. As they both walk away, Harry overhears Peakes urgently whispering:

“They were the beaters on the team that won the House Cup in 1994! They’re legendary! ”

“They told you that your swing was good!”

“*I know!*”

Harry smiles.

“How does it feel to be famous?” He grins.

“We’ve been famous in the right circles long before you, littlest brother lord,” Fred grins.

“Infamous, maybe!” Harry laughs.

“We need to talk about Malfoy,” George says quietly.

“Ugh, do we have to?”

“Afraid so.” Fred leads them slightly to the side so that they’re no longer standing in the flow of passing Quidditch players. “So we’ve been coordinating with Hermione and Ron and Ginny. They’ve worked out that the place Malfoy is going all the time is the Room of Requirement.”

“Really?” Harry frowns. “That’s weird.”

“They’re keeping an eye on it, using the map to see if they can get any hints of what he’s doing inside.”

“If it’s wanking to pictures of Tremblay that’s not something I need to know about,” Harry says quickly. Both Fred and George grimace.

“Us neither,” George shakes his head. “We also think we’ve narrowed down the things that Malfoy bought from Borgin and Burkes.”

“Well, obviously, it was the necklace.”

“There’s also a few other items.” George pulls a list out of the inside pocket of his dragon hide jacket. “These are things he definitely bought -,”

“How the hell did you get this?” Harry gives him a stern look. “Was it anything illegal?”

“Nope,” George says. “Just ... not not illegal.”

“That’s too many negatives for me to process,” Harry shakes his head. “Just don’t get caught.”

“Roger that, Marauder.”

Harry looks at the list.

Vanishing cabinet

The hand of Glory

Prometheus chains.

The Music box of the Fawn.

“Huh.” He frowns. “Is the music box bad?”

“No, it plays flute music that puts people to sleep.”

“Oh yeah, Quirrell had one in first year,” Harry nods in recognition. “Prometheus chains?”

“They’re quite a common type of enchanted chains, dragon keepers use them because they’re unbreakable.”

“Well,” Harry looks down the list. “This isn’t what I expected, I mean, it’s not on the same level as the other list, right?”

“Exactly, these aren’t items that are deadly.” Fred nods. “Even the hand of glory, it only -,”

“Gives light only to the beholder, yeah,” Harry nods. “What does the vanishing cabinet do?”

“It’s like the locker Mad Eye Moody was kept in.” George says. “You could keep a person in it for ages and they could be undetectable.”

“If you had the second of a pair you could use it like a tunnel but Malfoy only bought one,” Fred adds.

“So all this stuff ... it isn’t to kill someone?” Harry looks at the twins. It’s sort of relief but also makes him suspicious. “Tom isn’t the kind to go to all this effort *not* to off someone.”

“Yeah, it’s a conundrum. But whilst it isn’t the perfect collection of items to commit a murder ...” George hesitates.

“It looks like the perfect collection of items to subdue someone undetected,” Fred finishes for him. Harry’s stomach rolls and suddenly, he’s back in the Shrieking Shack, the coldness of poison seeping through his blood. *Helpless*.

“To kidnap someone?” Harry’s heart stutters. “Like I was kidnapped?”

“Yeah,” Fred says. “But we know it’s not *you*, because Daphne didn’t take the opals to you.”

“The opals, they were deadly though, right?”

“We don’t know,” George shrugs. “No one has survived them and there’s so little information about them apart from vague myths -,”

“George and Daphne have been doing a lot of reading -,”

“So they might not kill immediately, maybe they have some kind of coercion on them or maybe they had a portkey that could be activated with a certain word ... it’s hard to tell because Daphne doesn’t remember.”

“Right,” Harry feels like throat is tightening. “So not me, but ... but could it be someone like ...?”

Theo?

“It’s hard to tell, because Hermione interrupted Daphne before she really got going on what she was meant to be doing under the spell,” George says sadly.

“But we think the aim is to ... to take someone rather than kill them?”

“With this list, definitely,” Fred nods. “And it’s not like there’s a shortage of students who are protected by being here at Hogwarts, and the list is only getting longer with what Zabini and Nott and Greengrass are doing.”

“You’re talking about the Slytherins who have no-wands treaties with me,” Harry says flatly. “They’re the ones who are most in danger.”

“It’s really hard to get a kid out of Hogwarts, a parent or guardian usually has to literally walk a student out,” Fred says. “Unless they’re.... Well, you, Harry.”

“Thanks, Forge.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So you think Tom’s coming for one of them?” Harry asks.

“I mean, who can predict that Voldeyshorts thinks?” George shrugs a little helplessly. “I mean, if I was a Dark Lord and there were kids I could maybe use to manipulate other kids or their parents, they’d be the ones I’d want to kidnap.”

“If you’re right then that’s Blaise,” Harry says quietly. “Or Daphne, no one has more neutral powerful parents than them in Slytherin.”

“Or it’s someone who has a lot of their own growing influence,” Fred says flatly. Harry’s stomach churns. “He takes his lordship next weekend and getting Lord Nott would be a strong play. Especially if he thinks he can recruit him. Having a seventeen year old Death Eater Lord in Hogwarts would definitely strengthen his position.”

Except Theo would never turn, Harry thinks. He’d die first. Therein lies the problem, Harry can see it on Fred and George’s faces without them needing to speak. They’re both worried about what Harry will do if Theo is taken. *Burn the fucking world, probably.* Sparks begin to gather at Harry’s fingertips and he shakes them out, breathing hard. Severus’ voice is in his head. *Breathe, farzandam.*

“Nothing’s happened,” George says softly, rubbing Harry’s arm. “And we don’t know for sure. We’re just going over the possibilities.”

“Yeah, and Malfoy’s going to have his work cut out,” Fred’s eyes are fierce. “If he’s after one of those three people, they are the hardest people in the entire school to pull one over on.”

“Present company excluded,” George smiles.

“I’m not sure about that,” Harry snorts. “I’ve been fucking kidnapped *twice*, three times if you count Sirius and the Shrieking Shack.”

“At some point, Harry, we’re going to talk about implanting a tracking device in you,” Fred says. “We’re working on something, like enchanted jewellery.”

“What, like a muggle dog?”

“Exactly like that,” Fred says cheerfully.

“Pet insurance policy for a missing Lord,” George smirks. “If found, please return to *Weasleys Wizard Wheezes*, Diagon Alley.”

“I’d feel better if you put one in everyone else,” Harry mumbles, thinking of maybe getting Kreacher to put an electronic tracking device in Theo’s tea until he remembers that electrical things don’t work in Hogwarts. *Stupid fucking magic.*

“Don’t lose your mind over it,” George says softly. “Remember, nothing has happened yet and we’re ahead of it. We’re not going to let anything bad happen.”

Harry is a little comforted. He knows that if anyone can achieve something when they put their collected minds to it, it’s the Weasley twins.

“Okay,” Harry sighs and rubs his face. He can’t help but think about how much easier this would be to manage if Draco wasn’t under his Sanctuary. *Then I could just jinx him and be done with it.* “Do you know where he took the vanishing cabinet?”

“It’s weird, he hasn’t picked it up yet.” Fred frowns. “It’s still there, in the shop.”

“Can you keep an eye?” Harry asks. “If he has it taken somewhere we can follow then at least if someone’s taken, we’ll know where they’re taken to.”

If someone takes Theo, Harry knows he will feel it. Maybe practising stretching the bond isn’t such a stupid idea after all.

“Okay, milord.” Fred squeezes Harry’s shoulder. “Will do. Are you coming to the Gryffindor party?”

“No, I’ll just wait here for Ron,” Harry smiles at them. “Have fun.”

“We’ll owl you,” George says.

“Thanks for looking after Hedwig for me.” Hedwig’s been spending more and more time at the shop in London since Harry is too worried about her getting hurt flying to and from Venice. He suddenly feels a sharp pain in his chest. “Hey, if, I dunno, if something happens will you keep her with you? Just to make sure, y’know, she’s not targeted.”

“Yeah,” Fred frowns. “But nothing’s going to happen.”

“I know, it’s just everyone knows I’ve got her, right?” Harry swallows hard, remembering what Sirius told him in third year. If Severus is right and this is his last term at Hogwarts, then Hedwig will be safer staying away from Harry. “She’s distinctive. I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Course,” George nods. “We’ll keep her.”

“Thanks,” Harry sighs in relief and watches the twins walk away. Then, when he’s sure they’re out of earshot, he leans his back against the wall and breathes heavily through his nose. He’s pretty much held it together for the last two weeks since he found out about the horcruxes and Slughorn and he and Severus had their big, awful chat. It was kind of like going through a storm. After it, Harry’s been sort of calm. His nightmares are still there but the potions help and he can always go through to Severus’ quarters which Harry’s started to distantly think of as ‘our’ quarters. It’s felt like fourth year, after the first task when for a

blissful month, things were gentle and relatively normal. Now Harry feels like the egg is looming over him again, except this time it's so much worse. It's not something he can take in the bath with Cedric. It's most akin to the feeling he used to get on the Hogwarts Express at the end of the year when he slowly realised he was going back to the Dursley's and nothing was magically going to stop that from happening.

What's the point of a magical world if you can't stop the bad things from coming? Harry thinks. Sahara's voice drifts back to him from wherever she's hanging out. Probably the Greenhouse. Since the end of November she's either been there, in Harry's bed with him and Theo, or curled in front of a fire. Boomslangs are not made for Scottish winters, even ones imbued with magic.

Because the magical world is still the world, Sahara whispers. *It still has people in it.*

And snakes.

Snakes do not make the same problems humans do.

Ain't that the fucking truth.

"Potter-Black." Harry smells his magic before he sees him. Cloying and sweet, the heavy taste of the compulsion that always exists between them nowadays. He opens his eyes and stares at Draco and groans inwardly. *I swore to Severus I wouldn't hit him again,* Harry tells himself firmly. *Will not hit him.*

I could bite him, Sahara whispers.

No one should have to do that.

"Go away, Malfoy," Harry says aloud. Draco only shoulders his broom and curls his lip in distaste.

"You know Weasley only caught the snitch because she was riding your broom," he flicks his damp blonde hair out of his eyes. "I know you've been giving her tips and tricks, it's basically *match fixing*, you know. I could report you."

"You seriously think I care about Quidditch?" Harry laughs, shaking his head. "Christ, catch up, Malfoy. You're slower in real life than you are on a broom."

"Sore because you can't fly, Potter?" Draco glares at Harry's hand. "Because you're deformed?"

"Yeah, well, at least I'm not *morally* deformed," Harry snaps. "I don't force myself on people."

Draco pales, his flushed cheeks starting to look like strawberry and cream ice cream.

"You forced this Sanctuary on me!" Draco steps closer and Harry tries not to flinch, because the smell of the compulsion just won't go away. At least when he leaves Hogwarts he won't have to smell him anymore. *There's the bright side, Potter.* Harry smirks to himself but Draco

seems to take it as combative. “You started it, Potter! You’re just angry that I tried to level the playing field!”

Harry hates the way Draco talks about what happened in Hogsmeade. It makes a part of Harry feel small and pathetic, like he’s making a big deal out of nothing. *You are not*, Remus’ voice says calmly inside his memory. Harry straightens his back.

“Is that what you call it? Because other people call it fucking creepy but then Voldemort does like to be fucking creepy,” Harry sneers. “Has he taught you the same tricks he uses on your Aunt and Dad when he forces *them* to do stuff?”

“You shut up! My father has the Dark Lord’s *favour*! It is everything he has dreamt of!” Draco’s cheeks redden and Harry wonders if it’s embarrassment. Harry wonders if Draco really knows what’s happening between his father and Tom. *Legal, consenting, uncompelled and respectful*, that’s what Magnus says. Harry can maybe get on board with the notion that what Tom does is legal between two adults and maybe he doesn’t compel Lucius Malfoy but Harry doesn’t for a second believe that anyone truly consents to anything with the threat of Tom’s anger hanging over them (except maybe Bellatrix and can someone so clearly barmy as a box of pixies be truly consenting?) and Harry knows for a fucking fact that nothing Tom does is *respectful*. Draco is carrying on, advancing on Harry with his eyes glittering with anger.

“What happened between us -,” Harry’s insides flinch at the ‘us’. “- It wasn’t about *you*, do you honestly think I *fancy* you, Potter? I have a *boyfriend*! I was just showing you that I’m *winning*!”

“There is no us,” Harry says flatly. He remembers how Draco viewed him in his memories; like Harry was a toy he was determined to play with. Harry won’t play. “This isn’t a game. I’m not playing against you. You’re an idiot if you think I’m keeping score.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re finally losing!”

“I’m saying that because I don’t care.”

Draco seems staggered by that. Harry wonders if Draco will ever understand that the game he’s been playing in his mind with Harry all this time has been entirely one sided.

“You’re a liar,” Draco splutters. “You *do* care and I hate you!”

“I don’t hate you,” Harry shrugs.

Draco’s eyes widen. Harry realises it’s true. Harry hates quite a few people, really. He’s got a good list: Vernon, Petunia, Tom, Dudley, Piers Polkiss, Slughorn, Bellatrix ... even on particular days, Dumbledore, but of all the people Harry hates and could easily throw a Cruciatus Curse at without thinking, Draco doesn’t even break the top ten. Harry realises that whilst Draco made him feel really awful last month, his talk with Severus helped him realise something: None of it was actually about Draco. There are worse people, there are real monsters out in the world who have carved their mark into Harry’s skin and mind with their actions. Draco Malfoy is not one of them.

“You’re annoying, because you keep acting like we’re fucking *twelve* and I know you’re up to some kind of really stupid shit for Voldemort -,” Draco flinches. “But I don’t care enough to hate you, Malfoy. I’m not wasting my time thinking about you.”

Draco’s face twists into a snarl and he presses forward. Harry doesn’t feel trapped this time. He just folds his arms and stares at Draco, remembering what the Goblin King said. He doesn’t need to compel Draco. He doesn’t need to be afraid of Draco ever again. *Because he’s not Tom or Petunia or Vernon. He’s just a boy, like me.*

“You will care!” Draco shouts. “You *will* think about me when I’m victorious in my task, I will be the envy of every servant of the Dark Lord, they all know how much I will rise! You will be destroyed and you will know who did this to you.”

Draco’s breath is warm on his face and for a second, Harry feels an old flash of panic, but then he reminds himself. He’s not cornered like he was at the Dursley’s, or he was against the headstone with Tom or with Bellatrix in the cage. He’s not cornered at all. *Draco’s cornered with me.*

“Get the fuck away from me,” Harry says flatly.

Draco leans back, looking triumphant, as if he’s happy that he’s rattled Harry. He doesn’t step back, however. Harry thinks of the Goblin King: *Wixen listen to nothing but power.* Harry lets the Black magic build up in his skin, starting to glow. Draco’s eyes widen with fear.

“You will leave the people I love alone.” Harry says quietly. “If you touch Hermione or Ron or ...” *Theo*. “... Blaise, I won’t hold back. That’s a promise.”

Draco has frowned ferociously when Harry said Blaise’s first name, but Harry doesn’t have time to process it.

“Get the fuck away from him!” A loud voice yells. Suddenly Ron is there, pulling Draco back away from Harry and standing between them, wand held out and face ferocious. Harry watches Draco and sees how his face changes fluidly from fear to a sneer. Harry thinks he sees relief there. *He’s glad Ron interrupted. He was afraid of me.*

“Ha! Weasley!” Draco whips out his own wand. “You think you’re a match for me?”

“You fucking assaulted my best mate and your Dad helped kill my Dad,” Ron’s voice is a growl. “I am fucking *itching* to be a match for you, you prat.”

“Been running around telling lies, have you?” Draco sneers at Harry in a way that reminds Harry painfully of Dudley but Harry doesn’t move, merely folding his arms and raising his eyebrows. Draco’s eyes quickly slide back to Ron, as if it’s more comfortable to look at an angry Weasley than an unflappable Harry. “I didn’t *assault* anyone, I defended myself.”

“Oh yeah? Defended yourself lips first, did you? Please,” Ron snorts. “You’re pathetic.”

“Watch your tongue, Weasley!” Draco snarls and Harry can tell he’s working himself up for a curse, so he leans forward and puts a hand on Ron’s shoulder.

“Leave it, Ron,” he says quietly. Ron turns around to look at him, brown eyes searching Harry’s face for any signs of discomfort. “Malfoy and I are done.”

“We’re not done!”

Harry and Ron ignore him and walk away, despite the yelled insults, both of them just catching one another’s eye and shaking their heads at this typical display of Malfoy bravado.

“Are you okay?” Ron demands.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry says. Ron gives him a suspicious look and then grabs Harry’s hand, checking his pulse. Satisfied, he gives it a squeeze and drops it.

“You need a cup of tea and a sit down,” Ron prescribes firmly.

“Honestly, I’m fine,” Harry smirks. “You sound like your Mum.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, he just backed me against the wall and quickly realised what a bad idea that was.”

“You threatened him?” Ron frowns. Harry thinks it’s a sign of how much Ron has grown in the last year that Ron doesn’t immediately look gleeful at the idea. Ron knows what’s at stake.

“Just reminded him that I’m more powerful than him,” Harry shrugs.

“Good,” Ron nods firmly. “That’s the way to deal with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dickface Draco’s not like us, mate,” Ron’s voice is solemn but clear. “He’s not used to going into a battle as the underdog. He’s never chased spiders or faced twenty death eaters in a grave yard -,”

“Or stood up to a convict on a broken leg,” Harry nudges Ron who flushes and shoulders his broom, swinging both of his arms over it across his shoulders like he’s carrying pails of milk.

“Or that,” Ron admits. “Dickface only picks fights he can win. He’s too stuck up to lose. Except at Quidditch, obviously.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true,” Harry muses and gives his friend a sideways glance. Ron’s got taller again. “That’s really smart, Ron.”

“Winning boosts my brain cells.”

Harry stares at him fondly. For a second, he feels mournful. He should tell Ron that he might have to leave, he should tell him right now, but he can’t make himself say the words. They’ve been through so much at Hogwarts and Harry has to talk to Theo first. Then Hermione. If he

can make it through telling Hermione without falling apart, then he'll move onto Ron. He suddenly wonders if it would be easier if he just slipped away and didn't come back, just like he did after Arthur's funeral. *Don't be a fucking coward, Potter.*

"I believe you," Harry smiles. "You'll have to keep winning."

"I dunno, we have to play Ravenclaw next and Chang is an even better seeker now she's not mooning over you every second of the day." Harry snorts. Cho is going out with Michael Corner and seems happy. Harry's distantly happy for her because he knows, deep down, it's what Cedric would want.

"Are you coming up to the common room?" Ron asks when they make it to the castle entrance.

"No, I have somewhere to be."

"Or you could come and get a bit drunk with us?" Ron asks hopefully. "I promise it'll be fun."

"Drunk on what?"

"Neville distilled his own alcohol in the greenhouses, you can't tell anyone," Ron says in hushed tones. "He used, like, this Agave plant thing that he heard about? It's really good but really strong."

"Agave?" Harry begins to laugh. "So he made tequila."

"Tequila?"

"Yeah, Magnus likes it, it goes in cocktails it comes from ..." Harry wrinkles up his nose. "Mexico, I think."

"Really?" Ron's eyes widen. "Then yeah! Neville made tequila!"

"Hilarious," Harry shakes his head. "All you need is some limes."

"Limes? Dean's got pumpkin juice to mix it with."

"Ha! Well, tell me how that goes," Harry slaps Ron on the back with a grin. "I'll make sure Kreacher puts a sobering potion on your bedside table."

"Thanks, mate," Ron grins. "See you later? For tequila?"

"Later." Harry smirks and they part ways at the top of the stairs as Harry makes his way upstairs to Narcissa's new office. Before he approaches, he quickly pulls out the Invisibility Cloak from his school bag and throws it over himself. He waits patiently for Theo to come out and when he does, brushes a hand against him. Theo stiffens but Harry immediately presses a thought through the bond: *Room of Requirement*. Theo nods and sets off towards the seventh floor, Harry following. When they get to the familiar patch of empty wall, Harry thinks furiously. *Fabiola's Cottage, Fabiola's Cottage, Fabiola's Cottage* until the door

appears. Theo opens it and slips inside, Harry quickly following him and closing the door behind him. Harry pulls off the invisibility cloak and Theo looks around slowly.

“We’ve not been in here like this since last year,” Theo says softly. He reaches up and brushes his fingers against the hanging herbs.

“Yeah,” Harry swallows hard. He likes the Room of Requirement like this, but something about it is a bit sad, because even though it looks exactly right, it doesn’t smell right. It’s still a magical intimation. *Not everything is better with magic.* “Do you miss it?”

“Do I miss Mother’s cottage?” Theo walks slowly around the Potions bench. It’s set up exactly the same way it was this time last year, when Theo was brewing the glamour potion. “No. Do I miss how it felt when we were there together? Yes.”

Then why do you want to stay behind? Harry’s not ready to ask that question yet. He’s still afraid of what the answer will be. So he asks a different one.

“Why did you write to Magnus about stretching the bond?” Harry sits down on the replica of the little cot they shared the summer before last. He runs his hand over the familiar ratty blanket and smiles fondly, remembering how it had felt in those first few days in the cottage, waking up in Theo’s arms. Feeling different, feeling wanted for the first time, wanted in a way he had never felt before, not even with Cedric. Theo looks over at him.

“Because something is coming,” he says.

“Did Narcissa tell you that?”

“She didn’t need to,” Theo sighs. “The signs are everywhere, Rosier is making moves, your parents are making plans ...”

“Yeah,” Harry puts his finger through a hole in the blanket. *What does it have to do with stretching the bond?*

“And now I know what’s coming,” Theo leans against the Potions bench. “It’s Dumbledore.”

“What?”

“Who Draco has to kill, it’s Dumbledore. That’s what’s coming. He’s going to try to kill him.”

Harry stares.

“*What?* Dumbledore? That’s insane!” Harry jumps up to his feet, starting to pace. “The twins told me just now that everything Draco’s bought from Borgin and Burkes is for a *kidnap* not for a murder, how the *hell* does Draco think he’s going to *kidnap Albus fucking Dumbledore?* This is insane, this is *not* going to work!”

“It doesn’t seem like it, Draco is certainly not who I would choose as an assassin, but maybe it’s not supposed to work,” Theo shrugs. “Maybe the Dark Lord wants him to fail, so he can have Draco kill Lord Malfoy. Or maybe just kill Draco.”

“That is something Tom would do,” Harry sighs, sitting heavily back down and hugging a pillow to his chest. “But it’s messy, right? And he doesn’t *win* anything, Tom likes to gain shit, you know? He kidnapped me and yeah, he didn’t kill me but he got resurrected out of it. What does he get out of this if Dumbledore isn’t dead?”

“Then Dumbledore has to die,” Theo says firmly. Harry can’t help but wince. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Harry mutters. “I mean, I know he’s going to die, he’s dying right now, but it’s still weird. He knows so much about Tom and he’s ... y’know. Not going to be here.”

“Yeah, that is true. He has a lot of valuable information. Hopefully he’ll be able to give it to us before the end,” Theo sighs. Harry smirks a little. Theo doesn’t have any of the same feelings about Dumbledore that he does and honestly, that’s a bit refreshing. “But if the Dark Lord truly wants Dumbledore dead, he must have a contingency plan of some kind. He cannot be relying entirely on Draco.”

Harry thinks hard about what Draco said: *I will be the envy of every servant of the Dark Lord, they all know how much I will rise!*

“Fuck,” Harry sighs and flops back down on the bed. “The Death Eaters know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Narcissa told you, that means she knows, that means Severus knows,” Harry stares bleakly up at the ceiling. “The whole reason they asked me to take Draco under my Sanctuary was to protect him. They’ll do anything for him. They’ll make sure he doesn’t fail.”

“The Unbreakable Vow,” Theo whispers. “Snape took a vow to protect Draco, if he thinks that Draco will suffer if he doesn’t kill Dumbledore -,”

“Dumbledore’s dying anyway,” Harry’s heart thumps heavily. “It wouldn’t be murder -,”

“That doesn’t matter do you think that Snape would do it? Kill Dumbledore so Draco doesn’t have to?” Theo asks evenly.

Harry closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to think about it but he knows that it’s possible. If Severus loves Draco, really loves him, Harry reckons there’s nothing he wouldn’t do for him. After all, look what he does for Harry and Harry’s just his random child that launched into his life a year ago. Not like Draco, who Severus has loved for seventeen years.

“I think Severus will do anything to protect someone he loves,” Harry says steadily. He thinks of everything Severus has done for him and Harry’s not even sure if Severus loves him. Severus wants him and wants to be his father, Harry knows that, but Harry doesn’t know if that means love. Not like he knows that Remus loves him, because Remus tells him all the time.

Your Sire tells you in other ways, Sahara whispers in his mind. Harry ignores her.

“He’s like you then,” Theo smiles. Harry gives him a short smile back. “Are you going to talk to him about this?”

“And ask him *what?* Do you have to kill Dumbledore if Draco doesn’t?” Harry groans and flops a hand over his head. “Jesus, I am *not* going to let that happen.”

Harry knows one thing for sure. He’s not sure if Severus loves him as much as Draco or if Harry loves Severus like he loves Remus, but he’s not going to let all of Draco’s crappy mistakes fall on Severus’ head. *No way.*

“Harry.”

“No, I mean it,” Harry sits up on his elbows and glares at Theo. He’s not sure about so many things that might come in the future, but he’s sure about this: Severus will not be the one to kill Albus Dumbledore. “I won’t.”

“You might not be able to control it.”

“Just like I’m not going to be able to control you not coming with me?”

Theo stares at him. Harry feels his stomach swoop with terror.

“Theo?” Harry swallows hard. “What’s going on?”

Theo rubs his hands together and sighs. Harry sees a curious blue glow around his ring. Whatever is going on in Theo’s head, his magic is clearly responding to it. Not just his own magic, his heir magic too, Harry can smell burnt parchment on the air.

“I have a treaty with Hilary Lee.”

“Yeah,” Harry frowns.

“Fitz has asked me to take him as his ward so he can avoid being made heir to the house of Yaxley.”

“Christ, Yaxley wants to do that?”

“Yeah. I’ve decided.” Theo swallows hard but his eyes are fierce and beautiful. “I’m going to make him my ward on my birthday.”

“Okay, will that ... what does that mean?”

Theo hesitates and Harry somehow knows what that means.

“No!” Harry says loudly, standing up. “Are you kidding?”

His heart thunders in protest, inside his chest, he can feel the bond tightening and Theo actually jerks slightly forward, as if the invisible tethers between them are pulling him towards Harry. Theo takes a deep breath and pulls back, his voice trembling as he tries to keep it level.

“Harry, if I leave with you then Nathaniel and Hilary and all the others, they’ll be completely at the mercy of Rosier -,”

“I don’t care!” Harry yells.

“You do care!” Theo yells back. “You *do* care, and you care what happens to all of the younger students, like Selwyn, who have sworn to you because they believe you can protect them! You care what happens if you leave them undefended!”

“So it’s my fault if they’re in trouble because I have to leave?” Harry feels sick with this. It’s one thing to imagine having to go to Venice with Remus and leave Severus and Ron and Hermione behind but leaving Theo? *Not fucking possible.*

“I didn’t say that, but there’s nothing that says *I* have to leave,” Theo’s hands are gripping the potions bench hard. Harry can’t believe that he’s hearing these words from the same boy who was so fucking angry over the summer that they were apart. Harry feels like the tables have flipped somehow and he doesn’t quite understand.

“I’m saying it!” Harry yells and he can’t help the feeling rising inside him, a feeling like he wants to wrap Theo up safe and tight in words and vows that will mean he’s always safe, always protected. “You’re *mine*! You come with me! That’s the rule! You have to come with me!”

“Harry,” Theo takes a slow breath, as if there isn’t enough air in the room. “Don’t try to compel me.”

“I’m not!” Harry exclaims.

“You are, you don’t realise it but you are, it’s just like it was the first time you told me not to choose you by the lake -,” Harry remembers that moment, Theo’s admittance that it felt like a pulling in his chest. “You’re doing it because of what you wish would happen -,”

“I’m just talking to you!”

“Then don’t wish I was obedient!” Theo yells, his grey eyes suddenly sharp. “Don’t *want* that, Harry!”

“I *don’t* want that, not even a fucking little bit, all I want is for you to be *safe*!”

More than anything, more than I want to live or breathe.

“Harry, I have a consort shield. You’ve already made me safe.” Theo says steadily. “If you are on the run, I can’t bring the son the leader of the Congregation with us and you made him vow to never leave me so -,”

“So this is my fault? This is about Blaise?”

“No, this about me,” Theo says, folding his arms. Harry’s trying not to panic but it’s hard, made harder by how resolute Theo looks. Harry’s seen that look before. It’s the look Theo had before he first stroked Harry’s face in Privet Drive after the Dementors and told him he’d be back. *Fucking watch me.* Theo’s decided. Harry can’t help it, the feeling rising up inside him of desperation pressed on by magic. *Don’t leave me, don’t fucking leave me, I love you -*

“Stop it,” Theo says sharply.

“I’m not doing anything,” Harry keeps trying to breathe.

“Yes, you *are*.” Theo says emphatically. “Bane is right, your magic is entirely based on will -,”

“Everyone’s is -,”

“You only have to think something and magic makes it happen, you *want* me to do what you want so the bond is trying to make me, just like it wanted me to kill you in Skye!” Theo shouts and Harry’s chest tightens. *Is that what I’m doing?* “So for Odin’s sake, just *think*. Do you want to control me completely, like you controlled Daphne? Is that the kind of love you want?”

“No! Of course not, I want you -,” Harry whispers.

“Then listen to me,” Theo urges, moving forward and cupping Harry’s face earnestly. It’s such a relief to be touched by him that Harry gasps intensely with gratitude. “Take a fucking breath and listen to me.”

Harry does what he says. He takes a deep breath and leans his back against the wall. *I love Theo. I don’t want to compel Theo.* He remembers what Severus taught him and takes a long breath in and a longer breathe out.

Be calm, Greenheart, Sahara whispers inside his mind. Listen to your Grey One.

He wants to leave me.

He is your mate. A mate does not leave you.

Harry tries to let that sink in. He’s comforted by the feeling of Theo siting down on the cot beside him, placing his hand on Harry’s knee, and Harry gratefully tangles his fingers with Theo’s.

Don’t leave me, Harry begs through the bond. Please.

I’m never going to leave you, Theo’s fingers squeeze his. This is something different.

Harry wants to believe him but the magic inside him, the tight curl of the bond, is protesting violently and the Slytherin magic in his ring is hissing, want to bond, wanting to protect, wanting to shield the people he loves.

Do you trust him more than you trust magic? Sahara asks inside his mind.

Yes, Harry thinks. At least I want to.

Then choose to, Greenheart.

He remembers everything Severus has taught him about choices. Choosing to make amends with Daphne, choosing to believe he's not a nuclear weapon just waiting to explode, choosing to believe he can value life and live it. *If I can try to do all those things, I can choose to trust Theo more than I trust anything else.* Harry takes a deep breath in and then sighs it out.

"Okay," he says quietly. "I'm sorry. I'm listening. Tell me ... tell me what this is."

"Thank you," Theo draws in a breath slowly and Harry watches him, admiring his beautiful face. Theo's grown in the last year. He's face is thinner than Harry's and his eyes carry a different maturity than they used to. Harry's stomach cramps with worry for all the changes he won't see in Theo's face if they're apart. "I'm neutral, Harry."

"You're fidelity bonded to me, Theo, you're not fucking neutral."

"Politically, I am," Theo drops his head back against the wall, exposing his throat and Adam's apple. Harry wants to kiss it. "That's what I've been working towards, I'm trying to strengthen the neutral political base in this country to protect people with backgrounds like mine, to help us be stronger in the future. If I go with you, if I leave ..." Theo swallows heavily. "I won't be neutral."

"So you want to stay neutral?"

"Harry, I'm the Sorcerer." Harry sucks in his breath. Harry has no idea why but the moment Theo says that word, the bond spirals out of Harry's chest between them. It's blue and gold and vivid and dancing over their skin and twisting down their arms in helixes of light. Theo gasps and stares at him.

"What -?" He whispers.

"I don't know, I think it's the word, I think ..."

Harry can't help himself but he surges forward and kisses Theo. He tastes like his magic, thunderstorms swelling on a hot summers day and mead, sugared plums and intoxicating sweetness and all the best things Harry has ever tasted. *Home.* Harry follows the blood magic down, thinking the word, over and over again, *Sorcerer, Sorcerer, Sorcerer* and suddenly, he sees something, a vision of the past that he recognises from his dreams:

"I am not just fae," Nimue whispers and draws magic out of Merlin's skin, green leaves under the skin. "And I know what you are."

Merlin looks at Morgana, standing sharp eyed and suspicious, shrugging at the notion of things beyond what she can see and touch.

"Everyone knows what I am, what we are," Merlin says, gesturing to Morgana. "We're Wixen."

"No, she is wixen, she is the Sorceress," Nimue nods at Morgana, whose eyes widen, eager for new knowledge. Nimue looks back at Merlin. "You are something else."

“What am I?” Merlin asks, raw power dancing from his fingertips.

“You are the Mage,” Nimue whispers. “You will bring justice. We will bring it together.”

“Harry,” Theo gasps against him, lips suddenly hot with power, like the warm rain of a thunderstorm. “I saw them, Harry, what - what is ...?”

“They were first,” Harry gasps, his heart galloping because he knows Theo has seen what he saw, that the blood magic has showed him. “You - you’re my Sorcerer and I’m ... I’m your -,”

“You’re my Mage, yes,” Theo swallows heavily. “And Lovegood ...”

“She’s our Fae, yeah,” Harry snorts and brushes his nose against Theo’s. “We’re ... three.”

“Yes, I don’t know how, I don’t *understand* it, but yes, we’re three and ... what I do know is ...” Theo takes a deep breath, shaking his head like the vision has completely bemused him. Harry smiles fondly.

“It’s okay, it takes a while to get used to,” he whispers.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to visions of ancient magical legends, Harry, thanks very much.” Theo lets out a gasping chuckle.

“Just be grateful it’s not Death.”

“You are supremely, utterly unusual,” Theo opens his silver eyes and shakes his head in wonder. “You massive weirdo.”

“I’m *your* massive weirdo,” Harry smirks. “Tell me what you know, Theo.”

“Okay,” Theo takes a deep breath. “Morgana, she stood for her people. Mary Shelley, she was involved in muggle politics her whole life and all we have is the precedent, right? I’m ... I’m the hand that holds your power and I have to stay to be that power, I have to stay to protect the people who will fight for us, people we *need* -,”

“Like Luna,” Harry sighs heavily. “Right.”

“Merlin, Morgana and Nimue,” Theo whispers. “The power of three. It only works if we’re three, right?”

“Yes,” Harry doesn’t know how he knows that but he does. “You’re my Sorcerer.”

“It’s more than that,” Theo runs his fingers through Harry’s hair. “Politically I’m ... well, I will be ... your consort.”

“Oh yeah?” Harry whispers with a smirk as Theo blushes and Harry kisses his cheeks.

“It means your people are my people, Harry. I’ll protect them when you’re not there. There are a lot of younger people who have sworn treaties to you, specifically bear wands treaties. For Selwyn, for Fitz-Tremblay, things will be difficult without you here.” Theo hesitates. “For Hilary and Nathaniel, it’ll be even worse if I’m not here too. They’ll be completely at Rosier’s mercy. What we’ve been building in Slytherin, Blaise and Daphne and I, it only works if we’re all here.”

“You’re ... going to protect them,” Harry closes his eyes. “For me.”

“No, Harry, for *them*, for us, for everyone,” Theo’s silver eyes are intense, like molten metal. “That’s what it takes in a political uprising like this, we have to think about everyone and work together because if we don’t, it’s all going to fall down.”

Harry stares at Theo, amazed. Then he slowly pokes his face. Theo flinches.

“What was that for?” He demands.

“Are you real? Have you been polyjuiced? Because *my* Theo doesn’t even *like* people -,”

“Shut up,” Theo rolls his eyes and grabs Harry’s finger. “I don’t need to like people to do what I need to do to win.”

“Yeah?” Harry swallows hard. “What happens if we win?”

Harry wonders if Theo will talk about the courtship gifts, about the future that Harry’s too frightened to properly consider. Theo just smiles gently, like he’s seen every thought in Harry’s mind.

“We get to live,” Theo kisses Harry, tantalisingly slowly, full of promise and desire. Theo pulls away, gasping softly and pressing his lips against Harry’s forehead. “You’ll go with Lupin. I’ll stay and then, on the other side, we’ll get to live.”

Harry closes his eyes.

“Not right now, though right?” Harry whispers. To him, it feels like the bond is becoming stronger around them, a physical presence pushing against their skin, holding them together.

“You won’t be alone,” Theo sighs. “You need to take someone with you.”

“Who?”

“If you’re going, Granger needs to go too,” Theo’s words are hesitant and Harry’s knows just how much it costs him to say them, to say that Harry can leave with Hermione without Theo. “She’s a muggleborn, she’s your sister, she’s Heir to an important house and *your* house and ... aside from the wolf, she is your closest declared family,” Theo says hesitantly. “She can’t stay behind without you, she’d have to go to the goblins, or to the Contessa -,”

“Hermione won’t leave Hogwarts, not in the middle of the year, before exams -,”

“Trust me, she will,” Theo says, voice heavy. “Granger’s not an idiot. She sees which way this is going. That’s why she’s getting twitchy.”

“You too are so alike sometimes,” Harry shakes his head.

“Only sometimes.”

“Okay,” Harry swallows. “We’ll ... we’ll see what she says but we’ll have to tell her the truth.”

“Not us, not the bond -,”

“No, not this,” Harry smiles, tracing the lines of Theo’s face, leaving gold sparks. “But ... the soul bits.”

“*Horcruxes*, Harry.”

“Isn’t soul-bits so much funnier to say?”

Theo snorts and presses his face into Harry’s shoulder. Harry swallows heavily.

“Say the worst thing, Harry,” Theo murmurs. Harry strokes the back of Theo’s hair and then lies down, pulling Theo with him so Theo’s head is resting on his chest. Harry doesn’t know how to put it into words. It’s not dread, not quite, it’s more like the moment he saw Tom on the other side of the cage. The inevitability of it, that heavy feeling: *this is going to suck*. Harry feels like his throat is closing up.

“Tell me,” Theo whispers. Like always, ever since the first day in the Scout hut, Harry does.

“I just... I don’t know if I can do this,” Harry swallows. The pressure in his chest lessens slightly. Theo unconsciously lifts his hand to rub circles over Harry’s ribs and that helps.

“Do what?”

“Be apart again.” Harry whispers. “Disappear and prepare for ... I dunno what, some kind of war? Dumbledore’s lessons, all this soul-bits stuff, it makes no sense and will we even have enough time? Like, there’s only two weeks left of term and then if I don’t come back in January that’s only, like a month more together, if Dumbledore’s *dead* in a month, is he going to be able to get all the soul-bits by then? What if he doesn’t?”

“If the Dark Lord has tethers that still need to be destroyed after Dumbledore’s death then that’s what we’ll do,” Theo says firmly. “We’ll find a way. You’re not in this alone, Harry. You won’t be alone, we’ll be with you.”

Harry knows he’s right. He has Remus and Hermione and Magnus and Fred and George who can all help him outside of Hogwarts, not to mention the Goblin King. He’s not alone and he does believe that, maybe for the first time in his whole life. But it’s not helping because of one fact.

“But you won’t be with me, will you?” Harry whispers painfully. “And the last time we were apart, the last time ...”

Harry’s fingers drift unconsciously to his wrist, preparing to snap the rubber band that he hasn’t needed in ages. Since he can’t put words to it, he pushes them through the bond to Theo: *What if the edges get sharp?*

“Then you talk to me,” Theo kisses Harry’s fingers. “You write to me, we talk through the bond -,”

“We’ll have to practise.”

“Oh, now he comes onboard,” Theo rolls his eyes. “Yes, Harry, we’ll have to practise, but you’ll talk to the people around you.”

“What will you do?”

“I have Blaise and Daphne,” Theo says. “I have Narcissa. I have you. I believe we can do it this time.”

“You do?” Harry wants to believe too. He wants to trust that this is not all headed to disaster.

“It’s how we win, Harry,” Theo holds his face gently. “Remember? Not just you, but the three of us, and patterns of threes, and we have to trust something, we have to believe something -,”

“So you want to believe in Death?” Harry snorts. “She’s the most reliable source we have for all this Sorcerer/Mage stuff, her and Luna and *Magnus*, and honestly, that’s not a crew I’d use to pass a NEWT with -,”

“I think Magnus Bane, author of some of the most seminal works on portal travel, would disagree -,”

“We’re risking a lot,” Harry fiddles with Theo’s fleur di lis necklace. “I just ... are you sure you believe in it all?”

“You do,” Theo shrugs.

“Yeah, because I *see* her, Theo, I talk to her, I don’t have to believe in her, it’s like asking me if I believe in fucking *grass* -,”

“You’re incorrigible,” Theo shakes his head and kisses the back of Harry’s scarred hand.

“I mean it,” Harry stares at him. He needs to know, suddenly, that someone is sure. That someone believes he can survive this, that there will be an after, that he and Theo won’t be horribly torn apart by whatever comes next.

Trust us, that’s what Luna said.

Don’t be afraid of that, pup, Sirius said. *Your bonds are your greatest strength.*

“Do you really believe this is who we are?” Harry whispers to Theo.

“Yes. I believe in you,” Theo kisses him gently. “I believe in us.”

Harry wants to believe too.

Then choose to, Death whispers, her voice always close when Harry doesn't expect her to be. Choose not to be afraid. Choose to trust. Choose to believe who you are.

“Okay,” Harry sighs, not sure if he's answering Death or Theo. “Yeah, I ... I do too.”

Theo's smile is broad and Harry feels a sense of relief, a sense of something beginning.

You are both shedding, Greenheart, Sahara whispers. You are both becoming who you are meant to be.

You're a snake, of course you think everyone sheds.

“Harry, we've come so far. The only way out is through.” Theo gently bites his bottom lip and Harry *melts*. His brain is so full of relief, of love, of want, of *need*, he's starting to feel like they need to move on from the talking part of this fight to the kissing part of it.

“You're such a romantic bastard,” Harry chuckles, sliding a knee between Theo's legs and unable to stop himself from arching his back. Theo's eyes darken and he kisses Harry's rune mark, licking up sparks.

“Romantic? Okay, how about this?” Theo leans up above him, eyebrows raised and lips quirked in an adorable way that, Harry has to admit, even before he really knew how he felt about Theo, he still found very fit. “It's been a year since we first kissed in here.”

“Oh yeah, it has,” Harry shifts and wiggles his eyebrows. “Up for a repeat?”

Theo ignores him, pressing a thumb to Harry's rune as Harry's fingers catch his swinging, gold necklace and tugging, hoping to pull Theo back down to his lips. Theo resists.

“It's been almost exactly a year since we first kissed and even before then, even before we got on the Express, even before we finished the potion ... I knew it was you.”

Harry grins slowly. *I knew it was you.* It's the perfect phrasing. Harry knows exactly what Theo means. It didn't happen as quickly for Harry but he knew, too.

“You did?”

Theo nods, gently brushing Harry's bottom lip. Harry bites it and Theo tries not to grin. That's adorable too. Everything about him is adorable and Harry will never be persuaded to think otherwise.

“I've loved you for a fucking long time, Harry Potter,” Theo says solemnly. “I'm not going to stop now.”

There's something about that, Theo using his name just the same way he did when they first met, that makes Harry feel like his heart is a small sun. The bond glows vibrant gold around them and Theo's face finally splits into that raw, delightful, unplanned smile that Theo only has for Harry. *Mine*.

"Me either," Harry whispers, pulling Theo down to kiss him so they are both, wonderfully encased in gold. "I'm never going to stop."

Apollonius' Gift

Chapter Notes

Welcome back friends!

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K. Same warnings apply; I love to write a cliffhanger, it's my favourite thing. Do not cry over hanging cliffs in the comments, you have been fairly warned: I'm coming back with a bang.

This week: books are powerful. So is knowledge.

Next week: How to live with the knowledge.

“Are you ready for this?” Theo asks as they sit on Harry’s bed in the dormitory. Harry’s asked Hermione to join them and has warded his bed with the Black Magic, making them unseen and unheard. If any of his Gryffindor dorm mates come in, they won’t hear or suspect anything except that Harry is taking a nap in the middle of the afternoon.

“I’ll have to be,” Harry sighs heavily. Since the weekend, Hermione has moved on from pestering him to sulking silently, which is a surefire way to get secrets out of him because he hates it when she’s monosyllabic and distant. Besides, he does want to tell her. It’s Theo’s birthday tomorrow and term ends on the weekend. Everyone will be taking the Hogwarts Express home for Yule and Christmas and Harry can’t get on the train without telling all the people he’d needs to tell that he might never be coming back. It has to happen. He knows it, and Hermione has to be the first person. He’s just filled with a persistent sense of anxiety that when he does, they’ll be no going back. If he tells her about the horcruxes then he’ll have to find and destroy them, if he asks her to come with him when he leaves Hogwarts then he will inevitably have to leave.

You cannot change others destinies, a voice that sounds like Death whispers in his ear.

Don’t start with me today, Harry thinks sternly back.

“Harry?” A voice calls beyond the curtain. He sticks his head out of the curtains and sees Hermione standing nervously by the door. He gestures her over and she gratefully climbs in, Harry clicking his fingers to drop the Black magic and then clicking them again to raise it when she’s inside. She looks nervously between him and Theo. “So are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

“Yeah. First, I think ... I mean, I just ...”

Theo takes hold of his hand and squeezes it softly. Harry takes a deep breath and looks at his sister.

“Something’s coming,” he says. “I’m sorry, I wish it wasn’t, but it is and you’re my sister, you have to know and make a choice, you get to make one, at least, I just *have* to leave –,”

“What?” Hermione frowns heavily. “What on earth are you talking about? Where are you going?”

Harry knows he’s making a real mess of this but Theo is pushing words gently through the bond to comfort him: *Be honest.*

“I’m not coming back to Hogwarts after Christmas,” he says. Hermione’s eyes widen and immediately start to fill with tears. “Severus and Remus, they don’t think I’m going to be able to. That it’s going to be too dangerous.”

“Why?” Hermione whispers. “Is it because of Dumbledore? He’s really going to die?”

Harry nods slowly. Hermione puts her hand over her mouth and lets out a sobbing breath. Harry doesn’t know what to do. Theo is looking at Hermione curiously as if he finds her emotion fascinating rather than heartbreaking, like Harry does.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Hermione gasps, fixing her eyes on Harry. “It’s not because I’m going to miss him, I’ll never be able to forgive him for what he did to you, but I just ... I feel *bad*. I’ve wanted him gone for so long, sometimes I’ve even dreamt about a world where he was dead and Remus got to keep you and you grew up knowing you were precious because you are so precious, Harry, sometimes I’ve wanted that so badly and I even ...” Hermione swallows hard. “I even looked poisons up, you know? Not because I’d ever do it, but because I wanted him to stop hurting you -,”

“You’re not the only one,” Theo says. Harry gives him an incredulous look and Theo shrugs impassively.

“And now I just feel like I made this happen, maybe? Like my bad thoughts have killed him and now we’re going to have to fight without him and I was stupid and immature to want him dead before he’d give us all the help he could.”

Harry’s struck by how similar Theo and Hermione’s thought processes are around Dumbledore; that he’s a man who owes Harry everything he can give him because of his past negligence. For Harry, it’s all a lot more complicated.

Because you love him, Sahara whispers in his mind.

He hurt me, Harry thinks back.

That does not mean you do not love him still.

“I don’t know, it’s stupid, I don’t even believe in that type of thing,” Hermione goes on. “I don’t want to be the type of person who’s relieved that someone’s dying, that’s a terrible person to be, and I definitely don’t want to be the type of person who wants someone to live just so they can be useful to me.”

“Since Professor Dumbledore only sees value in living people for their usefulness, I’d say it was fitting,” Theo says.

“I don’t want to be anything like that man,” Hermione says fervently. Then she looks back at Harry. “So ... you’re leaving?”

“I ... yes,” Harry tries to flick his rubber band but Theo holds his hand. “I’m really sorry, Mi, I know how much you love school and you know I wouldn’t say this if it wasn’t necessary, but you’re going to have to leave too. I mean, you could go to a different school, I suppose, if we could make sure you’re safe but –,”

“He wants you to go with him,” Theo interrupts, and Harry’s sort of relieved. Hermione stares at him.

“What? You’re *not* going with him?”

“I’m not,” Theo squeezes Harry’s hand even tighter. “I need to stay here and honour my treaties with Slytherins. Harry’s treaties too.”

“Why can’t I do that?” Hermione frowns. “Stay here and honour Harry’s treaties with Gryffindors?”

“Others can do that,” Theo says. “The Weasleys, for instance. They’re like Harry’s family but they have the protection of their Lord to cover them. You are an heir alone. When Harry goes, you are undefended. And you are a muggleborn woman. You will have a target on your back.” Theo pauses. “They will not hesitate to hurt you.”

“You think the Death Eaters will try to kidnap me,” Hermione’s jaw tightens. “To get to Harry.”

“If I were Rosier, it is the first thing I’d do the moment you are undefended.”

Harry sort of hates it when Theo demonstrates how quickly he can slip into the mind of a Death Eater. He can’t deny it’s useful though.

"It would be easy," Harry swallows. "You know I'd do anything to keep you alive, Mi."

"Me too," Hermione smiles at him tremulously. "So ... we both can't come back after Christmas? We'll ... we'll miss end of year exams?"

“I don’t want you to have to leave. I know how important this all is to you. In a way, Hogwarts has been more your home than mine -,”

"No, Harry, stop." Hermione puts a hand on his knee. "Hogwarts is just a school. You and Ron, you're the ones that made it home for me. I have a home outside of this, I have parents and I have *you*, you're my Potter brother."

"Yes, I am," Harry watches the ruby of her Potter ring ignite. He can almost taste it, the distant, tea-flavoured song.

"You make this place home," Hermione says firmly. "Where you are, where my parents are, where the Weasleys are, those places are home. School is just school, and I'm sure I can keep studying. I'll find a way to take my NEWTS even if it kills me."

Harry snorts with laughter and Theo nods approvingly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Hermione nods. "We're still doing this together, aren't we?"

Harry sighs with sweet relief.

"I am if you are, Mi."

She smiles tremulously.

"It's not quite IR at Oxford but it'll have to do," she says. "Will we go to Venice?"

"Remus hasn't told me but likely we'll have to move around a bit."

"Why?" Hermione frowns.

"Because ... well, we might have stuff to do."

"What stuff? Are you talking about ... Voldemort stuff?"

Harry looks at Theo who nods, pulling a pensieve out from under Harry's bed.

"You bought a pensieve?" Hermione gasps. "Harry, they're *really* expensive!"

"No, this is mine," Theo says. "It belonged to my mother. I had Kreacher bring it from my Aunt's house."

Theo hesitates but pulls a vial out of his robes containing the pearly liquid of the memory. He uncorks it, pulls it out with his wand and drapes it over the silvery water where it is quickly absorbed.

"This is what we might have to do, might have to deal with and yeah, it's Tom stuff," Harry says.

"It always is," Hermione says sadly. "You can't tell me?"

"It's just going to be easier if we show you rather than tell you," Harry looks at the surface of the pensieve. "It's worse than you think it's going to be and it should answer all your questions about Slughorn. I'm sorry we couldn't tell you before but ... well, you'll see."

Hermione looks nervously between Harry and Theo and the water and then nods. Slowly, she touches her fingers against the surface and is sucked inside.

"Huh," Harry says. "I thought you had to go in face first."

“That says a lot about your tendency to launch head first into trouble.”

“I do not do that!”

“Literally everyone saw you swallow a snitch, Harry. Two words: Head. First.”

“You’re a dick, Nott.”

“You’re a whirlwind, Potter.”

Harry smirks.

“Are you okay?”

He nudges Theo again. Theo is staring at the surface of the pensieve, looking tense. They both already decided that Hermione doesn’t need to know the parts of the memory that feature Apollonius’ abuse but it’s still a lot for Hermione to watch and learn.

“Will she be?”

Harry knows what Theo means. Discovering all of this about a teacher who was supposed to care for them was a lot. For someone who looks up to the teachers so much, it might be particularly hard for Hermione.

“Hermione’s always better with more information.” Harry holds Theo’s hand. “Sort of like you.”

Theo nods tautly. Harry knows it’s been tense between Theo and Hermione. Neither one of them particularly likes it when Harry reminds them how alike they are (because they *are*) but Harry’s not going to stop. Harry thinks of them as two sides of the same, incredibly smart, overprotective coin. Today, however, Theo is still as a statue, his grey eyes far away as if he’s lost in thought. When he’s like this, Harry knows the best way to get through to him. He squeezes Theo’s hand.

Hey, look at me, he thinks through the bond, pushing warmth and love through it. Theo sighs and takes a deep breath, looking towards Harry, who smiles softly. *You’re fucking beautiful, even when you’re worried.*

Theo snorts with laughter and gives him a frustrated, fond look.

Oh, am I? Theo thinks back. He’s getting better at it, especially when they’re close like this. It’s almost as effortless as Harry now.

Yep, Harry grins. *You’re beautiful all the time, actually. It’s very distracting.*

Oh, is it?

Yep. Harry strokes his cheek. *So really, you should tell me what’s worrying you. So I’m less distracted.*

“Potter, you are a fucking menace,” Theo smirks and then sighs heavily, looking back at the pensieve. “I am experiencing discomfort in showing this dread secret to another person.”

“Hermione’s good at keeping secrets. She’s never told anyone about the Dursleys. She won’t tell.”

“I know that, it’s only ... well, Apollonius always taught me that the more people know a secret the more deadly it is.”

“I’d say it’s a pretty deadly secret to begin with, doesn’t get more deadly than Tommo’s soul bits.”

“Horcruxes, Harry.” Theo shakes his head in exasperation but grins softly.

“It’s going to be okay,” Harry says gently.

“Have you had any other thoughts about the objects that could be horcruxes?”

“Not really, I wish we could get some kind of confirmation that the things Dumbledore suspects are definitely horcruxes.” Harry looks down at the cracked stone of the Peverell ring and Theo strokes it, softly.

“I don’t suppose ...” Theo hesitates. “Did he ever mention stuff to you?”

“Dumbledore?”

“No.”

He knows what Theo’s talking about. He can’t lie that Tom has talked to him *a lot* over the years. Musings about his family, about power, about how much he’s looked forward to killing Harry, he’s heard it all.

“Nothing that I can think of that’s immediately useful.” Inside his head, he hears Tom’s words: *there is only power, and those too weak to seek it. We are fruit fallen from the same tree. I have seen your heart and it is mine. You are broken, you pathetic thing.*

“Sorry,” Theo says.

“It’s fine,” Harry shakes his head. “He just ... y’know, tends to focus on me and how shitty I am.”

“You know why, don’t you?” Theo’s eyes are intense. “He wants to control and manipulate you.”

Harry nods. In that way, he supposes, he’s just like every other person Tom Riddle has ever come into contact with. Hermione emerges from the pensieve, her eyes glassy and face flushed. She sits slowly down on the bed, looking at her hands.

“Are you okay?” Harry asks. She shakes her head. Harry sees her clench her hands into fists.

“Did he ever try to get you alone?” She asks. “Slughorn?”

“No.”

“You?” Hermione looks at Theo who hesitates. Harry squeezes his head. Theo nods, slowly. Hermione takes a shuddering breath. “But you’re ... he didn’t ...?”

“He was never successful in his clumsy attempts to deepen our acquaintance beyond a student/teacher association.”

Harry thinks that’s the most well-worded denial of molestation he’s ever heard. Hermione gives him a long, steady look.

“I’m still sorry,” she says. Theo raises his eyebrows.

“I have no need your apology but I thank you, all the same,” he says. Harry thinks that’s about as genial as these two are going to get. It’s almost heartfelt, really.

“Do we know if it happened to anyone else?” Hermione goes on.

“We don’t.”

“Do the teachers know? Are they looking into it?” Hermione asks urgently. “I mean, I’m presuming this is why he was fired and we got Professor Malfoy.”

“Yes,” Harry nods. “Dumbledore didn’t want to do it but -,”

“He didn’t *want* to fire a paedophile?” Hermione interrupts, her eyes blazing.

“I think he thinks, or maybe he hopes, it was only ever Tom.”

“Fucking delusional,” Theo mutters as Hermione snorts with approval, then her face pales.

“Dennis Creevey had remedial potions lined up for next term. I mean, could it be ...?”

“The staff are taking care of it,” Theo says but then pauses. “But it might not be remiss to mention suspicions to his older brother. Just in case Slughorn was ... laying the ground work.”

“Christ,” Hermione shakes her head in disgust and swallows hard. “Where the fuck is Ofsted when you need it?”

Harry snorts with laughter and gives her a fond look. She smiles tremulously back.

“So ... horcruxes,” she says. “What do we know about them?”

“Not enough,” Theo says.

“I know nothing about them,” Hermione says. “They’re ... soul containers and they’re created by murder?”

Hermione wrinkles her nose, exactly the same way she did when she first opened *Moste Ponte Potions*.

“Essentially,” Theo says. “There is barely any literature on them in the Library.”

“Did you check the restricted section?”

“You too?” Theo stares at Harry. “You are a corrupting influence.”

“Nope, wasn’t me,” Harry smirks. “Hermione got something out of the restricted section in second year and she didn’t even steal it.”

“How?” Theo demands.

“Lockhart gave me a pass,” Hermione shrugs.

“Lockhart. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“But also we don’t know what we’re looking for,” Harry says. “Remus is looking in the Congregation library but that’s mainly for weapons to destroy them.”

“The literature on them is sparse,” Theo looks as if the concept is thoroughly insulting.

“Probably because they’re so bloody terrible,” Hermione mutters and then her eyes widen. “Did you check the Black library?”

Harry and Theo look at one another.

“No,” Theo says. “We didn’t think of that.”

“Kreacher!” Harry calls. Kreacher pops up and takes the pensieve in his hands.

“Kreacher will take to safe place.”

“Hang on, we need something else too,” Harry looks at Theo nervously. He doesn’t want to lie to Kreacher but he’s also very aware of how keeping secrets for Harry has hurt Kreacher in the past. *I’ll tell him about the horcrux when I have to, not before.* “We need ... what do we need?”

“Can you bring us any books from the Black Library on soul magic?” Theo asks. Kreacher’s ears twitch. He glares at Harry.

“Is Master doing something stupid?” He demands.

“No! It’s a book, what’s dangerous about a book?”

“Master is an idiot!” Kreacher smacks Harry around the head. “Many books are dangerous!”

“Yeah, Harry, like the *Monster Book of Monsters*,” Hermione smiles. “We’ll be careful, Kreacher. I promise.”

Kreacher gives her a distrustful look but shakes his ears, muttering to himself.

“There is only one book so dark. Kreacher will fetch it.”

Kreacher pops away with the pesieve and Hermione nods, looking relieved at the possibility of a new book.

“So he made seven of these?” Hermione asks.

“That’s seven to get rid of,” Theo says.

“No, it’s not seven anymore,” Harry’s frowns hard. “I did the diary, Dumbledore did the ring, I did the crown thing -,”

“Wait, you *did* the diary?” Hermione gasps. “Riddle’s diary was a horcrux?”

“Yeah, makes sense doesn’t it?”

“Oh my god,” Hermione swallows heavily. “Ginny, she - she was possessed by a horcrux, it was literally his soul -,”

“You cannot tell her,” Theo says firmly.

“I wouldn’t, I just ...” Hermione’s eyes are glassy. “So you did that with a basilisk fang, Harry, the venom, it must do it.”

“Yeah, it did the crown thing too, in the Room of the Requirement.” Harry taps his bicep and the fang that rests there.

“You never told me that!”

“Yeah, well, it was a busy night.” Theo squeezes his hand. Theo still hates it when Harry talks about the night he was kidnapped. “So that’s three down.”

“Four to go,” Hermione frowns. “What kind of logic does someone use for picking horcruxes?”

“Meaningful things to him, Dumbledore thinks it could be one for every Hogwarts founder -,”

“Riddiculous,” Theo shakes his head. “He’s trying to force his own logic onto Lord Gaunt.”

“I agree,” Hermione says tartly. “I wonder how horcruxes are even made?”

At that moment, Kreacher reappears, holding the untitled book from the Black library, the one with the mysterious stains on.

“This is the only book on soul magic,” Kreacher drops it into Hermione’s lap.

“I’ve read this one!” Hermione exclaims. “There’s no soul magic in it.”

“Kreacher thought Heir Potter was a clever heir,” Kreacher snaps. “Soul magic is blood magic and it is a book of the House of Black.”

Kreacher gives Harry a look.

“Of course.” He sighs and rolls up his sleeve, exposing the wound of Wormtail’s knife that never heals. “Knife, Theo.”

“What?” Hermione stares as Theo wordlessly flips out his knife. Harry gestures for Kreacher to pass him the book.

“Show me where,” Harry demands and Kreacher obediently flicks to the middle pages, which look like a scribbled mess of tangled symbols, utterly unreadable. Harry positions his arm over the page and Theo angles the knife.

“Seriously? It has a blood lock?” Hermione looks disgusted.

“That’s how we do things in the House of Black,” Harry grunts softly as Theo dips the razor sharp tip into the wound, spilling Harry’s blood onto the pages.

“Sorry, beloved,” Theo mutters. Harry just grits his teeth and watches the blood spiral with magic, twisting the tangled mess of doodles and scratched nothings into words.

“What is it?” Hermione leans forward frowning. “It’s in Ancient Greek ...”

"Makes sense," Harry frowns. "Magnus told me that somewhere along the way there's Greek heritage that married into the Black family."

"Hmm, if it's a heritage language maybe it's a spell," Hermione says. "After all, Wixen family magic spells are often in ancient languages that reflect the heritage of their magic."

"Yeah," Harry nods, thinking of the Prince magic that responds so well to words in the ancient languages that Severus was taught as a child. He looks at Theo. "The Nott magic is sometimes in Norse, right?"

"It is," Theo pulls the book towards him. "I'll translate."

“You read Ancient Greek?”

“Some dialects, Doric, Mycenaean and Homeric.”

“Why?” Hermione demands, baffled. “You don’t need it for Ancient Runes -,”

“Narcissa and I communicate in multiple languages.” Harry smirks when Hermione splutters in amazement.

“Maybe you should ask Fleur if she’ll write to you in a language other than French, Mi.”

“I will,” Hermione leans towards Theo. “What’s it telling you?”

“It’s ... a first hand account,” Theo’s eyes are narrowed as his mouth forms words and his fingers follow the words. “From a Black in the 15th Century. She tried to create a child from a horcrux.”

“What?” Hermione whispers.

“Yes, she’d heard of the practise and she ... Odin,” Theo swallows heavily. “Her husband had killed her son and she killed her husband in the hope of ... capturing a piece of her own soul and using it to re-animate her child.”

“That is ... fucking dark,” Harry feels a bit queasy. “Magnus never told me about this.”

“He might not have known, it was before his time,” Theo’s finger moves down the page. “They sent her to an asylum.”

“Wixen have asylums?”

“Before St Mungo’s they did, yes, and St Mungo’s wasn’t founded until the 1600’s.” Theo’s eyes are bleak as he looks at Harry. “It didn’t work. Her son didn’t live again. She went mad.”

“The Black madness,” Harry swallows intensely. “Christ, maybe it is genetic.”

“Do we learn anything about the process?” Hermione taps a finger against the book. “Does it teach us anything?”

“It only housed a piece of her own soul, her son was still dead so her mourning was split betwixt them, it says, between her and her ... son’s body. It says her soul was full only of grief and it tainted the horcrux. The son’s body was so full of grief he self destructed. I mean, it self destructed.” Theo grimaces. “It was entirely unsuccessful.”

They all stare at each other, the bleakness of the story overwhelming them.

“So it is theoretically possible to make a living horcrux,” Hermione says. “But would Voldemort know that?”

“If the theory exists he might test it,” Theo says. “Maybe on an animal?”

“Nagini,” Harry says. “Nagini is the only animal that Tom would consider giving a piece of his soul to.”

“It’s possible,” Theo says after a pause. “I don’t know why he would.”

“Snakes matter to him, being a parseltongue, it matters more than anything,” Harry says without thinking. “He always wants to goad me into speaking parseltongue, it makes him so ...”

“Happy?” Hermione supplies drily.

“No, it’s the wrong word,” Harry muses, thinking about parseltongue and suddenly, Sahara shimmers into being beside him, warm from the greenhouse and rearing up to slide around his shoulders as if she knew his train of thought.

“It’s weird how quickly I’ve got used to that,” Hermione says.

“You’re telling me, she’s my pet,” Theo says.

“Timeshare,” Harry hisses down at Sahara: *“What’s the word I’m looking for?”*

“How does it feel when the one who calls himself the Lord of Snakes forces you into our tongue?”

“Like a defeat.”

“Then what would he feel?”

“Victorious,” Harry strokes her scales. Small sparks of magic jump up to meet his fingertips. “When I give in or he traps me into parseltongue, he’s victorious over me and yeah, victory makes him happy. Parseltongue and Nagini probably make him happy because it’s a victory over Slytherin.”

“How?” Hermione frowns. “I mean, Salazar founded a school and bred basilisks, he had a *basilisk* familiar! All Voldemort has done is keep a fucking big snake and be a terrorist.”

“That’s *all* he has done?” Theo raises his eyebrows. “You speak like he is underperforming.”

“Well, he’s no Mordred the Fell, is he?”

“I don’t think he needs your encouragement.”

“I’m hardly encouraging by suggesting that *maybe* he’s not as big a deal as he thinks he is!”

“If Nagini is a horcrux then he’ll think that’s a one up on Salazar,” Harry puts in, before Theo can respond to Hermione’s comment. “He’ll think a snake familiar that literally houses part of his soul is so much better than one doesn’t.”

“It would explain their connection,” Theo says. “And how you could see inside her mind too, that time at the Ministry. If you’re connected to him through your curse scar ...”

“I told you no snake would follow a Master,” Sahara hisses at Harry. *“This is why. The snake has a man’s soul inside her so she follows.”*

“Well, yeah, that’s Tom for you.”

“I do not like these things,” Sahara flickers her tongue. *“They sing of death.”*

“I remember,” Harry sighs. *“Fucking horcruxes.”*

“That word,” Theo says sharply. “That word in parseltongue. Say it again.”

“What?” Harry looks up at him. “*Horcruxes*? I’m saying horcruxes in parseltongue.”

“I’ve heard you say it before!” Theo’s eyes light up. “Remember, when we were in my mother’s room? It’s in Apollonius’ book! You know, the words you couldn’t translate because they were -,”

“Written by Tom, yeah,” Harry swallows hard. He gets a very queasy feeling when he thinks of that book. He doesn’t want to ask for it, but he knows what comes next and strangely, hears Death’s voice, floating next to his left ear.

It is nearly time, Master.

“Your father has a book written by Voldemort that has the word horcrux in it?” Hermione’s eyes are wide as saucers. “We need to read it!”

“I’ll get it. Kreacher!” Theo calls, and Kreacher pops into existence, frowning and flapping his ears.

“Heir Nott and Master must stop calling, Kreacher is busy,” he snarls. “Kreacher must make new house nice for Master and wolf!”

Harry’s stomach flips at the idea. It’s really happening. Kreacher is making real preparations, now. He can’t run from it any more.

“Here,” Theo reaches into Harry’s beside table and pulls out a curly curly.

“It’s my last one!” Harry protests, but Kreacher rips it open and swallows it whole, giving Harry a nasty grin. “You wanker!”

“Master and Heir Nott called?” Kreacher licks his chocolatey fingers.

“Kreacher, my mother’s box, the one I hid in my trunk?”

“Kreacher knows all about Heir Nott’s secret hiding places.”

“Kreacher does?” Harry stares at him stupified.

“Kreacher knows *all* the stupid hidey places silly children have.”

“Have you been nicking the sugared almonds Blaise’s Mum sent me?” Harry demands. “Anything under the floorboard is *mine*!”

“Master does not own floorboards!”

“You’re keeping stuff under the floorboards here, Harry?” Hermione asks plaintively.

“I’ve always done it, ask Ron. Most of the boys in here have a hiding place.”

“Why?” Hermione demands.

“Do I have to answer that?”

“Can you get my mother’s box?” Theo asks Kreacher whilst Hermione splutters. “Please?”

Kreacher nods and pops away, coming back a moment later with the box held in his hands.

“That was quick,” Theo frowns. “You know the lock combination?”

“Kreacher could break into Gringotts if needed to,” Kreacher hands it over smugly. “Wixen children are no match for elves.”

“Here,” Theo opens the page. “Read it.”

Harry takes a look at the words which to him, simply look like elegant scrawl but english. He warily looks at Hermione.

“Can you read this?”

“No, what is that?”

“It’s parselscript,” Theo says and Harry hears the tension in his voice.

“Harry, can’t you tell?” Hermione frowns.

“No, I can’t, I ... I don’t know why,” Harry swallows heavily. He doesn’t like to think about the connection between him and Tom. It makes him feel disgusting inside, polluted in a way he doesn’t understand. “When I try to speak the words in English, it comes out in parseltongue, listen, *the creation of horcrux* -,”

“Yeah, it’s still parseltongue,” Hermione clicks her tongue in irritation. “Okay, Harry, how about this, why don’t you read it in your head and then summarise it to us?”

“Okay,” Harry takes a deep breath and reads: *the creation of horcruxes is my greatest achievement. The power one feels is unimaginable, the freedom of the detachment from others, to arise beyond petty tangles of human minds.* Harry starts to speak. “*He’s going on and on about -,*”

“You’re speaking in parseltongue,” Theo says. Harry’s stomach lurches. “Look at me, don’t panic.”

Harry does that, staring into Theo’s silver eyes, trying to breathe deeply.

There is nothing wrong with you, Theo pushes the words through the bond. *Breathe.*

“Harry, it might be because you’re looking at the words,” Hermione says thoughtfully. “Look at me, take a deep breath and then explain it to me, like you’re explaining something from Quidditch.”

“Okay,” Harry does as he’s told and breathes for a moment. “He’s going on and on about how making horcruxes is so fucking great, and the power feels awesome because it detaches him from people and from his mind, I guess?”

“This is what makes him so insane,” Theo says. “He genuinely is mentally detached.”

“Carving up your soul has consequences,” Hermione says. *More than you know*, Death whispers nearby. Harry reckons he can hear the grim growling. “Keep going.”

“Okay, um ...” Harry reads and then looks at Hermione. “This is just more about how great he is. Even in his diary he bloody monologues.”

“Read on until we find something about what kind of objects he used,” Theo says.

“Okay,” Harry flips through some pages. “Christ, he’s wattle on and on ... okay, wait ... *I have used everything that is relevant to my rise to greatness. I have corrupted these tools and made them greater, purer, ascended their form. I have corrupted that with which I learned the art of the horcrux, my first feeble attempt with the life of an unworthy girl which now I build on. I have gone on to corrupt that which speaks to what I was born into as a Gaunt, I have corrupted that which I wished to be at Hogwarts, that legacy I inherited with my tongue, and the legacy I inherited when I debased myself, working so slovenly after my school days were over.* So, he’s ... I think he’s talking about the horcruxes he’s already made.”

“Great!” Hermione leans closer. “What does he say?”

“Okay, it’s sort of like a riddle, I’ll try and say it completely.” Harry looks at Theo this time, because to him, this sounds like the cadence of language that Theo sometimes uses. “He’s corrupted things, he says, and he thinks that’s good, that it makes things better. He talks about his first horcrux that he says killed a girl he thinks is unworthy -,”

“That’s got to be Moaning Myrtle,” Hermione says. “She was muggleborn.”

“So the diary must have been his first horcrux,” Theo says thoughtfully. “What does he say about the others? Maybe we can work out what they are.”

He says he’s corrupted something he was born into as a Gaunt -,”

“That’ll be your ring,” Theo nods to it. “The Gaunt ring, the original Slytherin ring descended from the House of Peverell.”

“Yep, then he corrupted something he wanted to be at Hogwarts, a legacy inherited with his tongue -,”

“Ew,” Hermione wrinkles her nose.

“That can only be a reference to his parseltongue,” Theo mutters. “To something of Slytherin probably.”

“And a legacy from when he debased himself -,”

“Can’t imagine that,” Hermione says.

“He’s talking about where he worked, for the old lady who had all the trinkets and stuff.” Harry stares at the words. “Maybe he got one of her things.”

“The cup, didn’t you see a cup in the memory?” Theo asks. “Hufflepuff’s cup?”

Harry nods, remembering.

“Yeah, I did, it could be that. So maybe Dumbledore’s sort of right about heirlooms. I did do the one that he said was Ravenclaw’s diadem. It just looked like a shitty crown.”

“Well, how does that fit into Voldemort’s descriptions?” Hermione frowns.

“Something he wanted to be at Hogwarts. I think he may have wanted to be a Ravenclaw,” Theo says. Hermione shoots him a suspicious stare.

“Why?”

“Because he was smart,” Harry traces the parselscript with his fingers. “Like you both are. I think probably, deep down, a part of him wanted to be the smartest person in the school. He was like me, he knew nothing about magic until he was eleven years old, he’d have done what I did. He’ll have grabbed all his books and stuff and researched, he’ll have seen that Ravenclaw was for the smart students, he’ll have wanted to be that. To prove to everyone he grew up with that he was better than them. He probably wanted to go to Ravenclaw. I wonder if the Sorting Hat told him he had to go to Slytherin, maybe he told him he could be great there, like it told me. Tom would have jumped at that, the possibility of greatness.”

Hermione and Theo look at Harry steadily.

“I wonder if you’re the only person to ever go to the Sorting Hat telling it where you *didn’t* want to be,” Theo says.

“So that’s five he’s talked about having made,” Hermione is counting on her fingers. “Does he talk about making two more?”

“Hang on,” Harry frowns and looks back down, following the parselscript with his finger. It’s strange how his brain doesn’t even see it, reading it like it’s English, but Harry doesn’t have the brain space to think about all the ways he’s strange today. “Umm... *I have plumbed the depths of what wixen are capable of, I have traversed the deepest canyons of the bloodiest magic ...*”

“In English?”

“Showing off,” Harry grunts. “Blah, blah, blah, I’m amazing at blood magic, no one’s as good as me -,”

“Does he say blood magic?” Theo asks curiously. “Because when we did the blood runes in Skye, Dumbledore mentioned that Riddle was fond of them.”

“Um, let me look.” Harry scans the text, trying to fight the rising annoyance that Tom Riddle, once again, cannot shut up about his own prowess even when no one is listening. “Oh, here: *the process of collecting my own soul, of giving it residence outside of myself is not only relieving me of the frailties of humanity, it is exposing me to some of the most delicious, darkest blood runes I have encountered. There is such glorious power in the taking of*

another life, it is a resource most undervalued in the magical world. Wow.” Harry looks up at Hermione and Theo, feeling queasy.

“What?” Hermione says nervously.

“Well, I didn’t think I’d ever find something that made me want to puke more than Draco Malfoy shoving me against a wall, but here it is,” Harry swallows down nausea. “He says that yes, he was doing blood runes and how cool that is that it’s making him distant from his humanity, but also that the power he gets from killing people, human life, is an undervalued resource.”

“An undervalued resource?” Hermione’s eyes glitter dangerously.

“That’s an absurd corruption of magical theory, all wixen theorists know the value of human life in the creation of magical components, if anything, life is overvalued, they don’t even want to share the magic in shed *blood*, that’s why they legislate so heavily against blood magic,” Theo says.

“Yeah, I don’t think Tom cares about what other wixen think,” Harry shakes his head. “He was fucking quick to use my blood to make himself, after all.”

Hermione squeezes his hand then drifts her hand up to the place on Harry’s arm where the mark of Wormtail’s knife still sits.

“It was horrible that he did that to you,” Hermione says. “But it seems like he wouldn’t have thought twice about using your blood to tether him to life if he was used to ripping apart his own soul and murdering people to live.”

“Yeah,” Harry snorts and looks down at the diary. “I can’t believe he wrote all this down.”

“I can’t believe he gave it to your father,” Hermione says, staring at Theo.

“Maybe he didn’t. Maybe Apollonius stole it,” says Harry.

“Stole it?” Hermione stares between Harry and Theo. “Do you really think so?”

Theo gives Harry a long look. Harry knows Theo is thinking about the years of resentment Apollonius must have carried against Voldemort, for using Slughorn’s abuse against him, for killing his wife. Harry can completely imagine that version of Apollonius, the kind of man who knew how to play the long game well enough to have a Canopic fucking jar, stealing Voldemort’s secret accounts of how he made horcruxes.

“It’s possible,” Theo says finally.

“But he couldn’t read it, why would he -?” Hermione’s eyes widen. “You don’t think he *knew* that Voldemort made horcruxes?”

“Apollonius knew Riddle when he was our age,” Theo says stiffly. “It’s possible that he ... inferred something.”

“And did nothing.”

“That was his preferred way of dealing with the Dark Lord.”

Harry sees Hermione’s surprise. Perhaps she expected Theo to jump to Apollonius’ defence, but Harry knows she doesn’t really *get* Theo yet. Sometimes he gets frustrated that the two of them can’t get on the same page, but if the only way Hermione can really understand Theo is to know the truth about what a dickface Apollonius was, Harry’s not sure that’s going to happen. He looks back down at the notebook, frowning.

“Hey, it mentions Nagini here,” Harry focuses on the words, muttering them in parseltongue. “*To make a human horcrux might be the futile dream of the Blacks of past ...* He totally must have read the book from the Black library.”

“Orion Black probably would have given him anything in the Black library he asked for,” Theo says.

“Or Regulus Black, he was a Death Eater, right?” Hermione says.

“We don’t talk about Regulus,” Theo and Harry say together, both smirking when they catch each other’s eye.

“Why?” Hermione demands.

“Because Magnus slept with him,” Theo says.

“Because Severus almost married him,” Harry says.

“*What?* Regulus Black, the *Death Eater*?”

“Because Death Eaters can’t get married or be sexually appealing?” Theo raises his eyebrows.

“I just don’t want to think about that,” Hermione wrinkles her nose.

“Which is why we don’t talk about Regulus,” Harry laughs. Theo smiles. It’s exactly what Harry needs right now, even if it feels wrong to laugh with Lord Voldemort’s journal in front of him.

“What else does he say?” Hermione asks, shaking her head, clearly utterly bemused by the notion of Harry’s Sire almost marrying anyone.

“Um ...” Harry mutters under his breath as he reads. “This is later entry it looks like ... *I am not fool enough to attempt what that stupid woman tried, but I am have already achieved more than anyone ever has, for I have created one living horcrux, and the bond I feel with a willing beast like Nagini is beyond anything else I have encountered in my life. I have known all along that my only peer could be myself, my soul inside her makes her my possession in a deeper way than anything else....*”

“That sounds like a lot to unpack,” Hermione says.

“Yeah,” Harry takes a deep breath. “It’s definitely Nagini. He ... made her a horcrux.”

“Wow,” Theo shakes his head. “That was incredibly risky for him.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asks.

“The lady in the House of Black tried to make a horcrux from a dead body but Nagini is a living thing, she’s a serpent, he can’t hide her away in a obscure location for years on end. She has her own will and desires and she is also subject to the wearing of time or illness, like any living thing. He must have truly believed he could sustain her through magic.”

“He’s arrogant,” Hermione’s eyes take on a dark gleam suddenly. “That’s how we’ll get him. He’s so arrogant he doesn’t expect it. He’ll never see it coming.”

“There’s another possibility,” Theo muses. “The first horcrux he created was likely the diary. That split his soul to create it. It’s a large chunk of his soul, one presumes. When he creates another, he carves from the already reduced soul.”

“Huh, that’s mathematically interesting,” Hermione says.

“Christ on a broom, there’s fucking *maths* involved?” Harry groans.

“What it means is that the horcruxes that held the largest portions of the Dark Lord’s soul have perhaps already been done away with,” Theo says quickly, a gleam in his eyes. “The diary and, if we presume the chronology proposed in what is written here, it would be the ring –,”

“And then the crown thing, yes!” Hermione enthuses. “This is good, Harry!”

“Why is this good?” Harry looks at them blankly.

“Because the items that are left carry an even more reduced part of Voldemort’s soul,” she says, smiling. “He thinks that nothing can touch his horcruxes, he doesn’t even know that he’s already lost some. He’s so disconnected from it, the parts of his soul they contain are so comparatively small, he doesn’t even feel it. It’s likely he won’t feel it if we keep destroying them.”

“But what if it doesn’t work like that?” Harry looks between them. “What if it’s like, I dunno, he knew he was going to make six so each horcrux only took a sixth?”

“I don’t think it would be magically viable,” Theo says. “You can check if he mentions anything, but from everything that we’ve read about the attempt made by the lady of the house of Black, horcrux making isn’t so exact. It’s a brutal magical exchange, a life for part of a soul, a simple cleaving.”

“Have a look,” Hermione is suddenly eager. “Is there anything else?”

Harry doesn’t say anything. He’s too busy reading on. As he does, his heart starts to beat painfully.

I am convinced that it is not impossible to create a human horcrux. My connection with Nagini allows me to control her almost fully, the possibilities of creating a human horcrux are equally exciting. What peaks of magic would I reach if I had a human who I could control thus? Who's mind was nothing but a pure an extension of my own? The foolish woman in the house of Black was too overwhelmed with sentiment to think appropriately, but I see the truth. A human body, animated with only my soul, not conflicted by their own, would be a perfect solution. It is obvious to me that the horcrux vessel should be a child, preferably a newborn, who will grow into their power, my soul flourishing inside them.

“Harry? What does it say?” Hermione asks. Harry can’t look at her, he can’t look at Theo. How can he look at either of them again, after this? He can't stop reading, hating every word, terrified of what is coming but still the words punch him in the chest, a single sentence that pulls him apart.

What better child could I choose for my horcrux than the child prophesied to destroy me?

“I have to go,” Harry says abruptly, standing up and letting the notebook fall onto the bed. He walks to the wall, he doesn’t care that Theo is stretching out to him inside the bond, wanting to pull him back. He doesn’t even need to think before he dissolves into the magic of Hogwarts.

Breathe, Greenheart, Sahara whispers to him. Harry doesn’t know if he can. Suddenly, Harry doesn’t know if he should keep breathing at all.

Horcrux

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

TRIGGER WARNING: Suicidal ideation/attempt

This time, Harry receives some well-placed intervention
Next time, Theo and Hermione finally have it out.

Floating in the in-between, formless inside the walls of Hogwarts and inside her mind, Harry remembers everything. Just like the moment when Voldemort possessed him in the Ministry of Magic, his mind is full of the past:

Voldemort's twisted face looks at him out of the back of Quirrell's head. "There is no good or evil. There is only power and those too weak to seek it. Together, we'll do extraordinary things."

Tom Riddle stares down at him as the venom of the basilisk pushes through his veins. "I like it better this way. It's just you and me, Harry Potter, just you and me."

Voldemort presses his forefinger against Harry's cheek and pain explodes behind his scar. "I can touch him now."

Harry runs through the graveyard towards Cedric's body. "The boy is MINE! He is MINE!" Voldemort screams behind him.

Voldemort traces a his finger down Harry's jaw. "I feel the violence inside you. How can you not be mine?"

Voldemort stares down at him at the ministry of magic. "Come along, little weapon."

It's all there. Tom's voice inside his head. Tom's sneer, Tom's rage, Tom's glee. Harry's pain when Tom touched him, Harry's pain when he was inside Nagini's mind, his pain when the strange crown had burned, his pain when he had first touched the Peverell ring. *What happens when a living horcrux touches another horcrux?* Harry thinks bleakly.

We are fruit fallen from the same tree, Tom whispers inside his mind. *I have seen your heart and it is mine.*

Harry is nothing. He is atoms floating. A mind without form and that mind is an endless stretch of despair. There is no horizon in it, no hope, nothing to grip onto to make it better, because Tom was right. Harry remembers Remus holding him close in his bed in Rome and telling him that everything Tom ever told him was a lie. Harry has held onto it for a long time, ever since he yelled it in Voldemort's ugly face when he was eleven. Tom is a *liar*. Except in this, he's not, because Tom is fucking right.

What would be justice, Harry?

Tom's question only deepens Harry's despair. What can justice possibly be if Harry is a tether to Tom's soul? Harry should just give it all up, give it up all right now and never come back to form and just exist as nothing here in the Hogwarts magic, because surely that's better than being a living breathing fucking *soul-bit* for *Lord Voldemort* -

There is a thrum around his floating mind, a distant gong of reverberations that is both loyal and loving and resistant and insistent, forcing Harry back into form.

Not nothing, the Hogwarts magic chimes around him. *Ours*.

Harry blinks, once he has eyes to blink with. There's wind in his face, his hair is ruffling. The air smells clean and bright and the night sky is filled with twinkling, vivid stars. He looks down. He's seen that view before. The fall from the top of the Astronomy tower. He's memorized it, those many nights only last year when he climbed up here after Cedric's death. The staggering height of it, so far that other parts of the castle are simply lost in blackness, so that Harry imagines that if he just tipped forward slightly, let the centre of his gravity shift so he fell over the edge, he would not so much die as be absorbed into the night that lingers below.

And then they would be one more soul-bit down.

Hermione knows. Severus knows, Remus knows, Theo knows, people *know* what they have to do to end Tom, and if all Harry has to do to keep everyone safe is give in to the parts of him that want this, so fucking badly, is that too much to ask? Severus will live. Remus will live. Theo will live. Everyone will live and be better off and he'll be gone and is that so bad, really? This is what Dumbledore must have planned after all, because how could Dumbledore not fucking suspect? If this is how everything has to end, eventually, why not get it done now? Before the others find out and they think less of him, before he sees the change in Hermione's expression when she realises her brother is part of Voldemort, before he sees the disappointment and despair in Severus and Remus' faces when they learn their child is fucking tainted, before Theo, fucking Christ above, *Theo* realises how twisted Harry's soul is, the soul Harry fucking *bound* him to -

"Do it," Harry whispers to himself. *For Theo. For Hermione. For Severus and Remus.* Maybe this is what Harry has to do. Maybe this is his role in the three, maybe he's just like Merlin, dying on the field of battle but instead it's this, jumping to the end, beating Voldemort and Dumbledore and everyone else to it.

“Do it, do it, do it, fucking do it, you fucking freak -,” the top of Harry’s feet are over the edge, he’s holding his balance in the uncanny way a Seeker can and listening to nothing but the whistling wind and the thunderous beat of his heart. “Do it for them so they don’t have to fucking do it for you, do it, do it -,”

He leans perilously forward, any second now, gravity will win, any second now –

But time stops. Everything is still. He looks up from the edge and sees Death walking towards him on the air, her face both fond and thunderous and the Grim is there, his black eyes glowing furiously.

“So now you know,” Death says quietly. “All things in the time.”

Harry stares at her. His heart has stopped racing. Everything has stopped and strangely, he feels like he’s starting to separate out from himself, like curdled milk. He can divide himself from his urgency and when he does, a heaviness settles inside him. Now he doesn’t know what to do.

“Now is the time, surely,” Harry looks down at the Grim, which is circling him defensively. Harry swallows hard. “I need to die. That’s all this has been, right? I’m like Sirius, I was always *meant* to be dead. I should have died that night in Godric’s Hollow and I didn’t and now I’m a horcrux and ...” Harry can’t stop the single tear. It has nowhere to go in this world without gravity or time, sitting, crystallised on his cheek. “Now I’m ...”

“What are you?”

Harry stares up at the stars that do not move from the earth that is no longer turning. Nothing is living and nothing is dying right now and in it all, Harry allows himself to breathe. Finally. Allows himself to take a second to think and feel and really let the truth settle inside him. *I am Tom Riddle’s last horcrux.*

“I’m afraid.”

“Do you fear me, Master?”

“No.”

“Do you fear yourself?” Death cocks her head. Harry swallows hard and can’t answer, because how can he say no to the first and yes to the second?

“I don’t know who I am,” he reaches down and digs a hand into the Grim’s fur. It is soft and real, so real. Whatever this is, the space in between, it’s as real to him as the world that moves and breathes and lives and dies. He stares up at Sirius’ cold star, not burning but simply hanging in the sky in this suspended space. “I don’t know *what* I am or what I’m for and I don’t want to be his.”

“You are my Master.” she steps closer.

“But it’s still in me, right? It didn’t die on the floor of Grimmauld Place? Or in the garden?” He looks at her hopefully, knowing already that he’s wrong. He can feel it, the green screech

inside of him that rose to a blinding pitch when he killed the horcrux in the room of requirement. Death shakes her head slowly and Harry tries not to slump. “*Why?*”

“Because you did not perish.” She does not look sorrowful, exactly, but he can feel something like compassion or sympathy coming off her in waves. “I have watched your heart stop twice before and yet you have not flown with me.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Because you did not reach the deathless lands,” She brushes a finger against his scar. “And you are tethered. These things are not sent by the body alone.”

Harry remembers everything that Remus has told him about the weapons that kill a horcrux; *the killing curse, basilisk venom, fiendfyre*. He's been tethered to life by a horcrux because he hasn't died in just the right way. The garden, the Chamber of secrets, the floor of Grimmauld Place, maybe even the Dido's Lament last year, it's all been the *wrong* death or stopped by something. Phoenix tears, A missed curse, the futility of it all builds up inside him to a roar.

“So I was, what? Just *lucky*? That's a mindfuck! Last year, in the grave yard, he nearly had me! He started to say the curse, if I had been a second too late grabbing the cup, he'd have killed me and the horcrux too!” Harry's voice is rising. “It's not fair! It was almost done! And then I would never have had ...”

I would never have had to know the worst thing about myself.

“I am the end of the road, I do not see the length of it. The whys are not for me.” She presses a hand against his shoulder. “This is not the end of your road, Master.”

Harry sighs and presses his cheek into her cold palm. She lets him, looking at him curiously, but Harry doesn't care if Death thinks he's weird.

“But my road should have ended then, in Godric's Hollow. I remember the curse, and now I know he didn't just want to *kill* me, he wanted me to be ... to be ...”

“A vessel. Animated. A puppet.” Death's voice is suddenly full of loathing. “Defying us, defying our balance. A soul split unnaturally between two vessels, unequal. One master, one captive.”

Harry shudders at that notion; nothing more than a shell of a body used to house Voldemort's soul. Would he even be himself? Would he even know what was lost? Tom clearly looked at the story of the lady of the house of Black and saw an opportunity to build a second self, with all the human capabilities and none of the will. Harry remembers Severus' words from the summer: *the Dark Lord creates possessions of those around him, of those he covets*. Turns out Severus was more right than he knew.

“He was going to build a fucking Voldezombie out of me,” Harry mutters. Inside his head he sees the flash of green light, over and over. “Why didn't it work?”

“How would I know, Master?”

“Because you’re *Death*. ”

“I do no magic,” she looks faintly amused. “That is for your kind.”

“You honestly have no idea why his fucking horcrux zombie ritual backfired? His killing curse *failed*, why did that happen? He should have killed me before I was even made a horcrux, I mean, was Dumbledore right? Was it all my Mum and her ... love?”

Harry doesn’t mean to sound derisive, he’s very grateful after all for the protection his Mum’s sacrifice afforded him up until Tom’s resurrection, but it seems so *unlikely*. That her choice to guard him, the same way James did, Sirius did, was somehow more powerful than theirs.

“There are patterns in the deaths of wixen.” Death stares at the stars. “So many looked for you in theirs.”

“What does that mean?”

“A mother, a Mage Guardian, a Black Prince. I have held each of their souls and all of them looked for something in their last breath. Each came to me with magic, whispering through their souls. Magic directed at you. A miracle son, a mage beyond the veil, a true hearts home for their magic. Hope is so important to your kind, so powerful.” She looks into Harry’s face. “Perhaps it gave me pause. Perhaps I looked for you, too.”

“So it’s all on you? You just decided that you’d keep me alive in Godric’s Hollow? What, on a *whim*? ”

“I do not decide, I do not take. Your road did not end.”

“But who decides that?” Harry asks desperately. “Did the road not end because it always wasn’t going to, or because he put a fucking *horcrux* in me and then it couldn’t end? Did you choose me because you were told to or because you wanted to and who decided you were allowed to fucking *choose* that?”

Harry knows his voice is getting a little desperate but it’s all so fucking fragile. The idea of a magical exchange, his Mum’s life for his, that’s at least simple. This is muddled and hard to catch. Death seems to know what he’s thinking because she smiles.

“I always choose you, Master.”

“That’s not helpful. Christ on a broom, *please* be helpful, give me something to understand this.”

She draws a silvery circle in the air, around it, he sees the faintest outline of a shadowed triangle and a line.

“When does it begin?” She says softly. “Always have been. Always will be. Always. You do not understand because it is not yet time. But it will be, because it always has been. It always must be.”

Harry stares at her in utter frustration, thinks that talking to non-linear beings is an absolute waste of fucking time, but then he looks at the triangle. He thinks about the last time he was in this shadowed realm with Sirius and the Black Prince, the look of determination and satisfaction in both of their faces. He thinks about what Death said: *A mother, a Mage Guardian, a Black Prince*. Harry thinks of his mum and the crazy charm she made up, one so good that even Severus didn't know it was in his head. He thinks of what Severus has told him about Eileen, who made the mage cage and died, Harry reckons, trying to make someone like Harry come through it. He thinks of the Black Prince and of Sirius saying: *you're a lynchpin in the universe*. Maybe the point isn't that things happened or why they happened but that they keep happening.

"Balance," Harry reaches out and strokes the circle in the air. "It's about balance, right? You said that last time, with Sirius. It's not about what Tom failed to do, but what they *managed* to do, my Mum, Eileen, the Black Prince, they ... they did magic with me in mind. They protected me. They died. He tried to kill me. He nearly died. It's not anything I did, it's them."

"There must always be balance in this realm," Death touches his forehead softly. "The earth moves. The ice melts. Life comes. So do I."

Harry stares at her. Those eyes are full of stars. A horcrux has been placed, a horcrux must be taken. His life was saved fifteen years ago when it shouldn't have been. It stands to reason it will need to be given back. Still, he finds he has to ask the question.

"Do I ... do I *have* to die to get rid of this thing in me?"

"You are my Master," Death smiles. "You do not have to do anything."

A tiny flicker of hope opens up inside Harry and he huffs with soft laughter.

"You're not very helpful."

"All I have learned of magic I learned from you. You always find a way, Master."

"A way to what?"

"To change."

"I thought I always stayed the same."

"The two are not incompatible."

"Are too," Harry scoffs.

"I am unchanged but I meet every soul uniquely," Death runs her long fingers through his hair. "Yet every soul finds me in the end, just the same."

There's something in way she says it, something eager in her eyes as she looks at him, that Harry recognises.

“You want the part of his soul, the part in me.”

“You have brought some to me already.” Death lifts her palm. Shadows spiral out of it slowly, and in the centre, is a red tangle of despair and pain. In it, Harry thinks he can see shifting shapes that could make the diary. Death lifts her other palm. The same happens in the other, but this time, he sees the crown. Harry rubs his scar and then stops. Death’s eyes rest on it.

“Can you take it out?”

She shakes her head.

“I do not take,” her voice is laced with scorn. “I only gather. Others send. The road ends. I do not take.”

“Got it, right, it has to come from the other side. Like a postbox.”

Death smiles softly and then looks at the tortured pieces of soul in her hands. Her eyes, if possible, become even darker.

“There is imbalance,” her voice is cold. “There is ruin. I gather what is given but it is not complete. It needs to be complete.”

“Tom won’t like that,” Harry mumbles, thinking of Voldemort’s journal about the horcruxes, about all the power it had given him.

“They are mine, not his.” Death’s anger makes her hair fly around her face. “They are displaced and mourning and out of balance. I shall have them for they are supposed to be in my care. I am the gatherer. They are lost in your realm. I shall have them.”

“No, you don’t get it, you don’t understand this like I do because you don’t know Tom. He won’t like *someone else* having them.”

Harry’s mind begins to turn, slowly. It’s not his fault, really, everything might be shit and he might have actually jumped off the Astronomy tower there for a second, but Harry can’t stop his mind from doing what it always does. Looking for a loophole. Looking for a scheme.

“There are other people, right, who have changed their souls?” Harry asks abruptly. “Like Magnus’ Dad? And Magnus, his soul becomes more his own with time, there’s ... there’s magic out there, isn’t there?”

“There is always magic.”

Harry’s heart gives a hopeful, juddering leap as he looks down at the Peverell ring, at the stone of the Necromancers. He remembers Magnus talking about his father in the past. *My father enjoyed similar talents to Harry ... There was a spell, I think, that came from the strangest of places, the much storied Potter-Grimoire.*

“There is always magic,” Harry mutters. “So maybe, I can get it out without dying.”

“All things die, Master.”

“Has anyone ever done this? Lived with a horcrux so long?”

“Not uncorrupted as you are.”

Harry doesn't feel uncorrupted and he must look it because Death tuts, her hair flicking.

“You have more capacity inside you than you know, Master. You contain ancient magics, give them host and hope and freedom. There is capacity.”

She doesn't say what for but Harry thinks they might be thinking along the same lines.

“What if I get the soul bits back to you, just not right away? What if I kept them, for a bit? Used them to get *all* of him to you? Soul bits and ... well, body bits, I guess? All of Tom Riddle, every part, soul and body? Wouldn't you like that?”

“Very well, Master, let us trade, as we always do,” she smiles. “Do what you must with your magic and schemes and I will wait until the shards of Tom Riddle, body *and* soul, are mine to gather complete.”

“Thank you.”

“But you must promise not to chase the end of the road.”

Her face becomes as stern as someone like hers can become. He remembers Severus' words: *value life*. He hasn't jumped and now, he knows what he has to do. He made a promise to tell Severus and Remus if he reached this point again. Death's words remind him of it. Maybe he will have to die, after all, Death's right, all things die eventually, but he's starting to feel a slither of hope that he might just get to live a bit first.

“Okay,” Harry says. “I'll find a way. To ... change. To live instead.”

Death smiles quietly and then touches his scar. Harry feels a tremor deep inside, something beneath his skin that longs to be with her.

“You always do, Master.”

Suddenly, Harry feels a jerk around his waist and time restarts. He's being pulled back from the edge, the wind is moving, the world is reeling and small but fierce hands are wrapped around his knees.

“Master will NOT jump! Master will NOT! DESPAIR IS IGNOBLE!” Kreacher shrieks, his tiny body wrapped around the back of Harry's legs.

“Kreacher?” Harry stares blearily down. Kreacher's long nails have actually cut through Harry's trouser legs, holding him fiercely tight, and he is bound by magic that is fizzy yellow coloured, in a way that makes Harry think of tangfastics. He realises he's never seen Kreacher's magic take a colour but he's smelled it before. That taut, almost acrid smell of burnt coffee is engulfing Harry entirely. “What are you doing?”

“Kreacher is loyal to the House of Black and it will not FAIL because MASTER IS AN IGNOBLE BRAT!” Kreacher bellows.

“Well that’s just rude! Can you get off me?”

“Not until Master has called Lord Prince, just like he promised he would when the edges are sharp because LORD BLACK WILL NOT PERISH ON KREACHER'S WATCH!”

“Okay! Okay!” Harry takes a heavy breath. He knows this is what he needs to do, but it feels suddenly nerve wracking to do it, much more nerve wracking than having a chat with Death or even throwing himself off the edge. *I did promise*. Harry does something he hasn’t done since Arthur’s funeral. He tugs on his tether. He’s not sure what kind of effect he expected, but there is silence, and the feeling inside him of the tether getting shorter and shorter. He looks down at Kreacher.

“How did you find me?”

“Kreacher has house elves monitor all the castle rooftops since Master is an ignoble brat who climbs on roofs and looks down and does not THINK about Kreacher or honour of the House of Black!”

“You’ve made the Hogwarts house elves your spies?” Harry boggles. “*How?*”

Kreacher’s smile is slow and terrifying.

“Many elves like sticky treats.”

“Wait, you’re *bribing* the Hogwarts house elves to be your spies? You’re taking my fucking sweets and using them as bribes?”

“Kreacher does not bribe, Kreacher sells!” Kreacher looks affronted by the notion. “If Hogwarts house elves owe Kreacher favours –,”

“Wait, wait, wait, you’re running a *racket*?”

“Kreacher is a small business owner!”

“Yeah, if your business is coercion! You’re a – a fucking elf-shaped mafia boss!”

“Harrison!” The door to the astronomy tower is flung open and Severus is there, looking like he’s run a mile, wand out, hair tousled, and the tether between them finally relaxes.

“Not dead!” Harry says quickly, because he knows Severus will have been out of his mind, running up the stairs. “But ...”

Severus’ eyes take in Harry’s body position, his eyes looking down at Kreacher gripping Harry’s legs. He sees how close they are to the edge. His eyes widen. Harry feels a slow despair that he’s done this, that he’s got to this point, but he did promise so he has to say it.

Say it, you fucking coward. If you can almost jump, you can fucking tell him. You owe him that much.

“I ... promised,” Harry forces the words out. “I promised to tell you if I wanted to ... if I tried ...”

Severus has stilled completely, as if he’s terrified that if he moves Harry will fall. When Severus speaks, his voice is incredibly strained.

“Thank you for telling me.” Harry watches Severus swallow carefully. “What has happened?”

Harry knows the meaning behind that. *What has happened that you would want to do this to yourself?* Harry closes his eyes and feels everything surge up, and he’s suddenly battling down tears. Everything to do with the horcruxes rises up inside him along with that same old despair to just make everything stop, just make it *stop* —

“Harrison. Please tell me.”

Harry opens his eyes again. Severus is standing a little closer and is looking down at Harry’s hands, which are glowing with his magic. He clenches and unclenches his fists but it doesn’t dissipate. Kreacher growls and grabs Harry’s left hand, plonking it down on his head to absorb some of the Black magic. It makes the threads of Kreacher’s yellow magic, still tangled around Harry’s calves, shine like a police light.

“Ask Dumbledore,” Harry chokes out.

After all, why should he have to say it all? He barely understands it, Dumbledore is the one who knows, it’s so obvious to him now. Why Dumbledore suddenly started to get weird last summer, once Voldemort was back. He remembers every time Dumbledore has looked at him that particular way, like Tom was about to jump out of his eyes, or whenever Harry talked about dying soon would have that look that was both mourning and guilty. *Once Voldemort was back, he knew I’d have to die. He knew all along.* Severus stares at him and wordlessly waves his wand, shooting a patronus. It disappears through the wall.

“Come away from the edge,” Severus says. “Please.”

Harry looks down at Kreacher with a raised eyebrow, wordlessly asking for permission to move. Kreacher shoots Severus a sharp, assessing look and Harry thinks he sees Severus twitch an eyebrow in response, but clearly it’s enough because Kreacher nods slowly and unwraps the fizzy magic from around Harry’s legs. Harry takes a single, staggering step back and Severus’ arm jerks forward, as if he longs to jump forward and steady Harry. His face is taut and lined and Harry knows he’s restraining himself from grabbing him, acting like Harry’s a bird that might take flight into the sky if he tries to catch it.

“I’m sorry,” Harry doesn’t know why his legs are trembling. *Because you nearly jumped, you moron.*

“You told me, for that I am grateful,” Severus’ chest is rising and falling fast but he manages to keep his voice level. “Thank you for valuing yourself.”

Harry’s eyes smart and he shakes his head again.

“Don’t,” he mumbles miserably. “Don’t say that, don’t value me, you don’t know what I am now -,”

Before Severus can open his mouth and speak, the door opens once again. Dumbledore steps in and Severus rounds on him, wand suddenly out and fury etched into every line on his face.

“*What* did you say to my son?” Harry feels something warm bursting inside his chest, despite the freezing chill of the wind. There are shadows pooling out of Severus’ Prince ring, erecting a slow, dusty shield between Severus and Harry and Dumbledore. “What hideous self-sacrificial propaganda have you fed him that would bring him to *this*?”

Dumbledore stares between Severus and Harry, his face crumpling. Through the dusky Prince shield, Dumbledore’s blue eyes meet Harry’s. There’s no legilimency there, only desperation.

“Not now,” Dumbledore says. “Please.”

Harry wishes he could steel something inside himself against this vicious confirmation of his worst fears, but there’s nothing he can do. It’s crippling and he slumps with it. Severus, with one eye and his wand on Dumbledore and one eye and his body angled towards Harry, twitches.

“So it is a timing thing,” Harry shakes his head wearily. “Right, because you don’t need me to die now, you need me to die later, once you’ve done all your dirty work.”

“Harry, you must know -,” Dumbledore begins, moving forward, but Severus side steps closer to Harry, blocking his path.

“Do not even *speak* to the child, Explain yourself to me *now*!” Severus twitches his wand at Dumbledore.

“I think Harry has made a discovery about Tom Riddle’s horcruxes.”

It’s the fucking understatement of the century and so completely Dumbledore to obfuscate, even at such a time as this, that Harry can’t help rolling his eyes. *Fucking typical.*

“*What* discovery?” Severus snarls, and since Harry is actually worried that Severus might accidentally curse Dumbledore before Dumbledore deigns to get to a point, Harry blurts the words out.

“I’m a horcrux. His last horcrux. He made me accidentally... the night Mum died.”

Severus’ face doesn’t change. His wand doesn’t move. His jaw ticks. But the tightness of the tether around Harry’s wrist is so sharp, Harry actually staggers towards him. Severus’ arm is there immediately, clamping Harry against his side, his wand still trained on Dumbledore. Harry doesn’t pull away, wonders if he even can, the tether between them is so short. Harry

can feel Severus shaking but his grip is furiously strong. Harry knows that if he were to launch himself from the Astronomy tower now, Severus would go right over with him. Something about that starts to crack something in Harry's chest and he lets some of his weight rest against his sire, instantly feeling exhausted, as he wearily observes Dumbledore's response to his words. His expression is astonishingly, predictably curious.

"I suppose, Harry, you have intuited this from our lessons, but also, perhaps from something you have learned inside yourself?" Dumbledore asks. Severus emits a low growl in the back of his throat and Harry finds that distantly amusing, as if Severus is doing a Remus impression. Then Harry realises he's going to have to explain this all to *Remus* and feels violently ill. *And Theo*. That thought is so bad Harry just buries it, drowns it inside his mindscape.

"Does it matter?" Harry's laugh is hollow. "It's true, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore says. "I have ... suspected so. Your mother's sacrifice undermined his plan to do away with the child who threatened him. Something happened in Godric's Hollow that he never intended on his quest for immortality but here we stand, in the remnants of Tom Riddle's hubris."

He fucking did intend it, Harry thinks balefully, *just way worse than you ever imagined*.

"When the curse rebounded, when your mother's sacrifice took effect, he was split away from his body, the last fragment of his soul homeless and finally resting in you. I never wanted you to find out like this, Harry –,"

"That's a lie, you just didn't want me to know *now*."

"The last horcrux, so the seventh?" Severus finally speaks, looking down at Harry. "That means you only bear less than 0.8% of the Dark Lord's soul."

It seems Hermione and Theo were right. There is maths involved.

"Enough to kill me over, apparently," Harry says, because he's an *idiot*, and Severus' face darkens as he turns his fury back to Dumbledore.

"*This* was your plan? To engage my help and the help of my child to hunt horcruxes only to then sacrifice the life of my only child? When he only bears *less than one percent* of that madman's soul?"

Less than one percent too much, Harry thinks bitterly, but Severus is going on, the Prince magic starting to take the form of thunderous clouds, rolling along the floor between them.

"You made me *swear* to destroy the horcruxes. Did you truly imagine that I would be held by my *word* to harm my own?"

Harry didn't know that but he's not surprised, even a little bit, by Dumbledore's choices. He is a bit surprised that Dumbledore didn't have the foresight to see that Severus was more likely to kill Dumbledore than stand aside and let Harry be killed. *Maybe he just really*

doesn't understand parents, Harry muses. That makes him think of his other parent, and what exactly *Remus* is going to want to say and do to Dumbledore when he finds this out. Even though this night has been the fucking worst, that thought does make Harry smirk a little.

“Horcruxes are designed as tethers, Severus, even the smallest amount is detrimental. As long as Harry lives then Voldemort does too, and the only way to unmake a horcrux is through death.”

“You cannot know that, it is an untested hypothesis!” Severus bellows. He is vibrating with pure rage and yet his hold on Harry is so secure, the Prince magic is wrapping them together so tightly, Harry does not doubt the surety of his hold on himself. Quietly, Harry starts to feel impressed. He’s never seen Severus quite like this, so utterly outraged and yet so defiantly self-controlled. His magic smells strongly of burnt herbs, as if the shadows of the Prince magic are scalding and singeing leaves as they coil around Harry and Severus’ legs.

“Severus, I have researched every angle -,”

“Did you go to the Congregation? Did you use their archives? Have you travelled to Astan Quds Razavi, or the Tianyi Gi? Have you consulted blood magicians and Necromancers and the Goblin King? Or have you simply assumed that because your *husband* was the last Dark Lord of Europe you are clearly educated enough to presume?”

“Woah,” Harry thinks that’s an interesting explanation as to what Theo has theorised between Grindlewald and Dumbledore. “I can’t believe you gave me shit about going out with a Slytherin.”

Unsurprisingly, Severus and Dumbledore ignore him but Harry does feel a validating squeeze of his shoulder.

“Secrecy is paramount, Severus, as is time, and we do not have *time*,” Dumbledore says urgently. “Voldemort must be stopped and I cannot do it alone. You speak of Grindlewald, but I am not the man I was, I am not young enough and unlike him, Tom Riddle will not hesitate. Our bond made us both resistant to a final confrontation, it gave our forces time to gather and prepare. We have no such delays available to us now. Our only blessing so far, has been that Tom Riddle has never imagined anything more than his demise happened that night. He has viewed Harry as an enemy to be turned or destroyed, and he must never know the truth of what Harry is. I am dying and when I am gone, Harry will be undefended and Tom Riddle must not, *cannot*, be allowed access to a living, human horcrux. Imagine the terror he could bring with a power like Harry to wield! He would cover the world in a darkness it would never recover from.”

Harry stares at Dumbledore’s pleading face. It’s strange, he thinks, to realise that Dumbledore and Tom view him both in exactly the same way. As a weapon. They both want different things, one to save the world and one to control it, but none of that matters to Harry. Not really. He’s just the weapon they’re going to use. Very gently but deliberately, Severus manoeuvres Harry behind him and then, with an almost effortless flick of his first finger, astonishing darkness spools out of his ring, the kind of darkness that eats stars and planets. Harry watches Dumbledore’s eyes widen.

“You are arrogant and your assumptions are baseless. Harrison is never undefended.” Severus’ voice is quiet but vicious, like the sharpest of blades. “He is not to be wielded, he is a child, he is *my* child and you will not have him, just as the Dark Lord will not have him.”

“You cannot guarantee that –,”

“You presume to tell me what I can guarantee for my child in the same breath that you demand, on your own flimsy assumptions, that he lay down his life for your cause? I have told you once before, Albus, you will no longer use my child in your strategy of sacrifice. I am telling you *no*. ”

It is emphatic, that last word, it is powerful and reverberates through darkness and the centre of every stone in the tower and Harry remembers how the Prince magic tunnelled in the Forbidden Forest, tearing the dark heart out of everything it touched. Severus could bring down the tower with a word. Dumbledore looks a little shocked but mostly intrigued. Harry doesn’t want him to think anything more of it so jumps in.

“Surprised that the House of Snape has got some game?” Harry says coolly. “Just because we’re not in the Sacred Twenty Eight?”

“I know better than to make such judgements, Harry,” Dumbledore’s eyes fixed on Severus. “I am not yet ... too arrogant to be unable to admit when I have underestimated someone.”

“Then let me be entirely clear, so you can adequately estimate me,” Severus says. “You will have nothing to do with Harrison and whatever slither of the Dark Lord’s soul resides inside him. Hunt the Dark Lord’s other soul shards, fight your war, if it gives you peace in your abominable choices, but you no longer have any influence on *this* matter. My child’s soul is not your business. Am I clear?”

Dumbledore smiles wanly.

“You have never been more so, Severus.” Dumbledore’s eyes become soft as he looks at Harry. “But Harry knows what is happening inside him better than anyone. I fear that you will not find a more adequate solution than what I have presented. Believe me, my dear boys, I looked for a better way. I am ... so sorry.”

Severus doesn’t move, doesn’t speak, as if he cannot possibly be expected to respond to that. Harry gives Dumbledore a long look and wonders, suddenly, how long Dumbledore has suspected this to be true. Was it since Harry’s scar hurt, the first time, all the way back in first year? Or since he spoke parseltongue in second year? Or did Dumbledore see something in Harry when Hagrid brought him to Privet Drive from Godric’s Hollow and is that why Dumbledore left him, fucking dumped him with the Dursleys? Then Harry looks at Dumbledore’s burnt, dead hand and realises none of it really matters, not if Dumbledore could care for Harry for all of the years they’ve had and still think this is the only way.

“Did you ever love me?” Harry blurts out. “At all?”

Severus stiffens.

“Of course.” A tear slips down Dumbledore’s wrinkled cheek. “I still do, Harry.”

Harry thinks this is the worst thing, then. That Dumbledore can love him and still think he needs to die. That Dumbledore can love him and still think he’s a weapon. Harry doesn’t know much about love, but he thinks about how Sirius jumped in front of Bellatrix’s curse, how his mother did the same, how James laid down his life. Then he thinks about how Remus held Harry so close in the Hospital Wing after the Department of Mysteries, even with his leg torn up and in so much pain. He thinks about how Hermione lets him fall asleep on her. He thinks about Ron, throwing himself in front of Malfoy’s wand the other day, and the twins, taking their vows, and Blaise, risking his life to defend Theo, *Theo*, astonishing, wonderful Theo, driving a car up the M1 and making their journals and loving Harry so surely. Then Harry thinks about Severus, telling Harry over and over, *you will live*. Severus, risking his life every day to keep Harry alive. Harry doesn’t know much about love but he knows that whatever Dumbledore thinks love is, he’s wrong. *That isn’t love*.

“You know, I really wish I didn’t, but I still love you too.” Harry swallows hard. “And I’m really glad you’re dying.”

Dumbledore takes a heavy, shaking breath and presses his fingers to his eyes. For a moment, he looks completely broken but Harry doesn’t feel bad. He only feels empty. He’s glad he’s encased in the smell of Severus’ magic, of burning herbs, and the shadows around them are holding him steady. Finally, Dumbledore looks up, eyes wet and gives Harry a tremulous smile.

“Me too, dear boy,” he whispers. “And do not worry, you shall not wait long.”

“Go, Albus,” Severus’ voice is a snarl. Harry wonders if it’s because Severus is finally close to losing his temper. “Now.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore turns, eyes downcast but at the door he hesitates, looking back at Severus. “I trust our bargain is still in play, Severus. I may only have weeks left to live but I trust you will not whisk Harry out of my reach. I will continue to shield you *both* here.”

“We will not be going anywhere,” Severus’ voice is bitter. Dumbledore nods and looks at Harry.

“I am very glad you are still with us, Harry.”

“For now, right?” Harry says. Dumbledore looks regretful but doesn’t respond. He leaves the tower. Severus holds Harry tautly until they have heard his footsteps recede. Only then does Severus drop his wand, the shadows around them dispelling as his Prince ring slowly draws them back in.

“Kreacher!” Severus calls. Kreacher pops back, immediately grabbing Harry’s trousers, as if to make sure he’s not headed over the edge again. Oddly, he looks up at Severus with surprising deference.

“Lord Prince calls?”

“Take Harrison to our quarters,” Severus says. Kreacher obeys, quickly, and Harry lands in the living room of Severus’ quarters. The fire is alight, the floo glowing. Harry sees the basket of messages on the hearth is already full. Clearly, Severus and Remus have been chatting tonight. Dumbledore’s words are thundering around his head. *Harry knows what is happening inside of him better than anyone.* Then Severus is popped through, face still furious. He immediately presses a hand to Harry’s pulse, looks at the numbers that appear above his Prince ring and stares intently into Harry’s eyes.

“You are alive,” he says. Harry can’t tell if it’s for him or for Severus’ own peace of mind but he takes a deep, tremulous breath and nods. Severus nods back.

“Kreacher, please pack your Master’s possessions ready for travel,” Severus says, moving to the kitchen as Harry watches him. “Only the essentials.”

Kreacher nods and pads off to Harry’s bedroom.

“Where am I going?” Harry asks warily. He doesn’t want to leave Severus. He’s a bit worried that if he does right now, he’ll lose himself entirely.

“We are going to Venice to collect your father,” Severus is pulling open a drawer and rummaging. “And then to Japan.”

“*Japan?*” Harry stares at him. “You just told Dumbledore we weren’t going anywhere!”

“Yes, I lied,” Severus starts to line potions up on the kitchen counter, his eyes roving distractedly over their labels. “Just as he lied to me.”

“But he’ll stop protecting you, he’ll ...” Harry’s voice trails off as he realises what Severus means to do. “We’re doing the thing? We’re running?”

“I am removing you from Albus’ reach,” Severus is lifting a black box out of the cupboard under the sink and pulling out knives, checking them and repacking. Not potions knives, either, Harry sees these are knives designed to hurt people.

“And then you’ll come back once Remus and I are safe?” Harry moves towards the kitchen counter. “To Dumbeldore? To Voldemort? To spy?”

“No.” Severus closes the black box with a firm click. “I will not.”

Harry realises this is not the exit plan they have been preparing for all these months. This is the catastrophic exit plan Severus offered him after Umbridge tortured him. The one where Severus takes Remus and Harry and hides all three of them somewhere so obscure that no one will ever find them again. The one where they cut off everything from their old life and no one, not Hermione, not Theo, not Voldemort or Dumbledore, follows them. Immediately, the fidelity bond in the centre of Harry’s chest starts to ache but Harry pushes that aside because he’s looking at the dark mark on Severus’ arm and remembering everything Severus has ever told him about it, about the torture a Lord can inflict through serf brands. He remembers Severus’ words the last time they talked about running, just like this: *I do believe that I can effectively hide you somewhere in the world before it causes my death.*

“No! No, we can’t run from this, the mark will kill you!”

“That is not your concern, Harrison,” Severus’ eyes are dangerous but Harry doesn’t care because he will not let Severus die like this.

“Isn’t it *fuck!*”

“Language!”

“You can’t do a bunk on Voldemort, you promised you’d keep spying! We talked about this *ages* ago in Skye, you said you’d go back, you said you’d be what I need -,”

“That was before Albus made it abundantly clear that he has no intention of preserving your life.” Severus says. “I was very clear with you, Harrison, I did not become a spy for the many. *You* are my only priority.”

“We need to stay, not just because it’s the only way Voldemort doesn’t crucio you to dust through your *fucking arm* and I have a fidelity bond, in case you forgot, but because I’m a *horcrux!*” Harry exclaims. “We have to sort that shit out!”

“We can sort it out very, very far away from Albus! The fidelity of your bond will endure being stretched and someone else, for *bloody once*, can carry the burden of the Dark Lord’s demise, for it is more than time!”

Harry’s surprised, because he doesn’t think he’s ever heard Severus even remotely come close to swearing in front of him. It makes him want to laugh, sort of hysterically, but he swallows it down.

“Dumbledore’s not going to get to me,” Harry says. “I’ve got a plan.”

“Your plan was to kill yourself!” Severus slams a potion down on the counter. Harry watches, in surprise, as the Prince magic suddenly explodes like a small dark star out of Severus’ hand and consumes the potion vial whole. Harry wonders if it’s accidental magic. “Forgive me for fearing the consequences of you being unable to control your need to sacrifice yourself in the face of Albus’ insistence!”

“And what if I can control it?” Harry can’t help yelling back, because it’s annoying not to be trusted, even though he knows the lack of trust in this moment is completely justified, but it’s very hard to explain that in that moment on the very edge, he met Death and she gave him a highly effective pep talk. “What if I’m not a reckless moron, like everyone thinks, what if, actually, I have a good plan and it’s totally *fucking fine?*”

“How can it be fine?” Severus bellows. “He wants you to DIE!”

It’s such an unusual outburst for Severus that Harry can’t stop himself from making a very poor joke.

“Yeah, but only for 0.8% of a soul, so maybe I only have to die 0.8%!”

Severus stares at him for a long moment and is incredibly, violently still. Harry remembers this version of Severus. *Oh shit.* Harry steps back.

“What are you doing?” Severus asks softly.

“You look like you’re gonna explode, like you did that time when I asked if you’d fu - slept with Mum -,” Harry edges further away from the oncoming outburst. “So I think maybe -,”

Severus marches around the counter and gently sets his hands on Harry’s shoulders.

“Stop,” he says. “Just stop.”

Very softly, giving Harry time to pull away, Severus draws Harry into his arms.

Oh. Harry realises dizzily. *It’s a hug.*

“There is no joke to be found in this. You are my child and you speak of dying.” Severus’ voice is cracking. “Even the smallest percentage is too much.”

Severus’ strong hands are wrapped around Harry’s back, carefully placed so as not to touch his rune scars. It’s that little kindness, the fact that Severus must remember exactly where Harry’s rune scars are, that breaks him and Harry does stop. He stops long enough to think, long enough to feel, long enough to realise that he very nearly killed himself and that Dumbledore thinks he needs to die and Severus is here, witnessing it all. *I’m so utterly fucked.* When he thinks that, Harry starts to tremble. He can feel the fear of it, the part of him that is still totally terrified rattling through him.

“It is all right, *farzandam.*” Severus holds him a little tighter and Harry gasps, feeling tears start to fall. “I am here.”

Those three words split something open in Harry’s chest and despair floods out of it, threatening to drown him. His knees sag slightly and his tears become sobs. *I don’t want to do this. I can’t do this.* He grabs hold of Severus’ robes and holds on for dear life, stuttering for breath as he presses his face into his Sire’s chest. All around them, mournful magic explodes from Harry’s Prince ring, dark shadows of it creating a black heart of magic that eats up the sound of the fireplace and Kreacher in the bedroom and the distant sounds of Hogwarts all around. It wraps them in a cocoon of deafening silence, until the two of them are left standing in its centre, Harry’s sobs the only noise between them. Still, Severus holds them together through it until finally, Harry doesn’t think he can cry anymore.

“I’m a horcrux,” Harry’s tears are soaking into Severus’ robes. “I’m poisoned. Don’t you care that I’m, like, I’m properly his now? I mean, I’ve got part of his *soul* -”

“You are yourself, Harrison, your own person. You might bear a sliver of his soul but he does not have *yours.*” One of Severus’ hands strokes his hair very gently. Severus always handles him gently. “No, I do not care.”

Harry didn’t know how much he needed to hear this, how much it matters to him that Severus, who is bound to Tom Riddle with a bond that could kill him, does not care that his

only child has part of that monster's soul. Harry takes a deep breath, rubbing his nose against Severus' damp robes. Here, with the Prince magic wrapped so tightly around them both that they could be in the nothing place, Harry feels safe. All he can smell is the scent of Severus' magic, sage and rosemary and smoke from cauldrons, and it calms the part of him that, until two seconds ago, was roaring with despair like a dying beast.

Now, Master, Death whispers close by. The Guardian must learn who you are.

"I have a secret to tell you," Harry can hear Severus' heartbeat under his ear. "I saw Death."

"Excuse me?"

"I saw Death again when I was thinking about ... y'know, when I was on the edge. I ... I need to tell you a secret about her."

Severus' hand continues to gently stroke the back of his hair and Harry thinks, tiredly, how fucking *nice* it is.

Then tell me, *farzandam*."

"She's not my friend. Death. I mean she is but she's not *just* my friend. She stopped me from jumping because ... well, she has other plans. Plans that she needs me for and she says you have to know now." Harry looks into his Sire's eyes. They're exactly like the Prince magic around them, Harry realises. Black and sooty, like fragments of coal burning on the edges. "She calls me Master. I'm not just a Mage or maybe a Necromancer. I'm her Master. Or I was, or I will be, one day and ... I believe her. I believe I'm meant to be something I don't understand yet and she wanted me to tell you about it. Because you're the Guardian. Our Guardian. She calls you the Guardian."

Severus stares at him and then takes a long breath, gently easing Harry's head back down to rest on his sternum. Harry stands there, lets himself be held by the man who called Harry 'son.' The man who does not care that he is a horcrux, or at least, does not think it is enough of a reason to push Harry away. Harry stands there and takes several slow breaths.

Your sire treasures you, Sahara whispers inside his mind. Harry wonders if to be treasured is how snakes talk about love.

"Let She Who Walks the Shadowed World say as she will, perhaps there is a Mastery waiting for you in another realm, I do not know, but she is right on this account; I will always guard you," Severus says. "So tell me what plan she brings us."

Harry nods firmly and pulls away, trying not to feel mournful for how safe it feels to be held by Severus. *Like a father*. Harry pushes that aside because now it is time to get to work. The Prince magic draws back into his ring and suddenly he can see and hear the fire, and there is light in the room again.

"We need Magnus."

Severus nods and quickly scribbles something on a piece of paper and feeds it into the fire, muttering: “Ludlow castle.”

“We also need to tell your father,” Severus says. Harry’s stomach drops. He’s not ready for that. He needs to do this one person at a time.

“Later,” he pleads with Severus. “Please? Can we just see Magnus first? I need to talk to Magnus and then ... we’ll do everything else.”

He also suspects that if he tells Remus tonight, Remus will pull him out of school and Harry doesn’t want that. Not tonight. He wants to stay at Hogwarts just a tiny little bit longer. It’s Theo’s birthday tomorrow. He doesn’t want to leave yet. Severus is frowning. Harry can tell this is exactly what Severus thinks too, that a part of Severus is still counting on getting Harry out of Hogwarts tonight. Harry is not ready for that, to leave and never come back. He’s not ready to leave Severus, either. Severus seems undecided when a piece of paper flies out of the floo.

“We have been invited to Wales. Bane has been making the Black castle at Ludlow suitable for living, in case you and your father should need it.” Harry feels dizzy at the thought of all the preparations that everyone has been making to keep him safe. *And now it’s all fucked, because how can they keep me safe from my own soul?* Severus beckons to Harry. “Come. We will floo through.”

Severus puts an arm around Harry’s shoulders as if it’s the easiest thing in the world and mutters a password into the flames. The floo grows tall in the grate and Severus shuffles Harry forwards, just like he has travelled in Remus’ arms in the past.

“On three,” Severus says quietly. “One, two -,”

“Three,” Harry says and together they step into the flames. He presses his face into Severus’ chest and thinks: *Safe. I am safe with my Sire.* For the first time ever, the word *Sire* doesn’t feel quite like enough. He remembers what Severus told him about his grandfather, the meaning of the name he called him. *Pedar. It is a Persian word. It means father.* Harry is sucked through time and space but somehow, it’s much less nauseating than usual.

The muggleborn and the pureblood

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

TRIGGER WARNING: references to child abuse.

This time, Theo and Hermione try to talk through their differences.
Next time, Harry and his parents make an unusual plan.

“Where did he go?” Granger demands. Theo looks between the wall and Granger, feeling frustration mount.

Harry? Theo tries, pressing a thought through the bond. *Are you okay?*

Nothing comes back. Either Harry is too far away to hear him or perhaps, still disintegrated in that space in-between in the magic of Hogwarts. Theo tries to swallow his worry. He reminds himself that he promised to trust Harry, to not pull as much on the bond, to believe he was able to look after himself and other people were able to look after him too. Harry has probably just gone down to see Snape. Theo tells himself that this is fine. He turns to Granger and tries to bury his panic.

“Do you think I am able to see through stone?”

“Don’t be glib,” Granger snaps, grabbing Riddle’s diary and perusing it before clicking her teeth in irritation. “There’s a whole paragraph here he must have read! He knows something, what does he know?”

“How should I know?”

“Because you know everything!” Granger explodes, tossing him the diary. Theo grabs it and stares at the hideous words, a part of him wishing that Apollonius had ever left the book to him. He traces them with his finger, trying to translate the few words he sees.

“This might be ... ‘Person is arrested’ ...I’m not sure ...”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“You understand Italian and a little French and yet you do not comprehend me speaking plain English to you?”

“He gave you a parseltongue *dictionary* last year! You’re writing it!”

“Granger, I can speak four languages fairly fluently and read many others and I am currently the *only* person in the known world who can understand even a *little* parseltongue without actually being a speaker, so I think you can adjust your expectations!”

“So you can’t speak parseltongue?” Granger demands.

“I can adequately understand a snake with murderous intentions towards all surrounding rodents and house elves. Unsurprisingly, my lexicon is limited.”

“And unhelpful.”

“Oh, I’m unhelpful?” Theo mutters. “You can go.”

“You’re the Slytherin the Gryffindor dormitory.”

“No, I’m a Slytherin in my Gryffindor’s bed,” Theo says, climbing back onto the bed and sitting against the headboard with the diary. “I’ll wait for him here.”

“You’re not going after Harry?” Granger looks suspicious.

“He’ll come back when he’s ready,” Theo says coolly, trying not to show his disquiet. Harry has disappeared and Theo can feel a strain in the bond, he knows it’s probably that he’s trying to pull Harry back, but he doesn’t feel like he can stop it.

Harry? Theo tries again, pressing words through the bond. He’s not even sure it’s working. *Tell me you’re okay. Tell me you’re alive.*

Nothing comes back. Theo feels his frustration mounting. For Harry, this is easy. He can reach out and push things through the bond without any effort. Theo feels like he’s trying to knock against a mental door that keeps dissolving into nothing. He might as well be screaming inside his own head. He forces himself to take a deep breath and looks down at the diary.

“And you’ll tell me what’s wrong when he does?” Granger asks.

“No doubt he will tell you, if he wants to.” The chances of him seeking Granger out for a discussion about Harry are as likely as him telling Draco Malfoy that he’s really quite a restrained human being. “Kreacher!”

Kreacher pops back, scowling.

“I told Heir Nott, Kreacher is busy!” Kreacher snarls.

“Check on Harry,” Theo says glibly. “Tell him his sister wants to check his wellbeing.”

He notices the way Kreacher’s eyes narrow and knows that Kreacher understands that whilst Theo is being deliberately light in tone, he is worried too. Kreacher nods slowly.

“Kreacher will find out where Master is,” he mutters and pops away.

“Happy?” Theo says to Granger, looking down at the journal. He expects Granger to huff and stalk out, leaving Theo to quietly sit in the silence of the Black magic, protected against the other Gryffindors, until Harry returns. Perhaps with some silence Theo can set his mind to deciphering the parseltongue. Maybe he can get Sahara to help him. However, when he looks up, Hermione Granger is staring down at him, unmoving.

“What, Granger?”

“We need an alliance, Nott,” Granger folds her arms angrily.

“Excuse me?” Theo stares at her, wondering where this is going.

“You and me, we need an agreement, a treaty, something.”

“Of what?”

“I’m his sister, I’m the one who is going to be out there with him -,” Theo feels a pang when she says that, “- when he leaves I’m leaving too, where he goes I’m going, so we need some kind of alliance to get through this. You need to trust me.”

“I do trust you,” Theo says. *With some things.* Granger’s brown eyes flicker intensely and he has the horrible sensation that she is reading his thoughts.

“Not just with Harry, you have to trust my judgement,” she says sharply. “Can you do that?”

Theo hesitates. Granger’s mouth becomes a hard line.

“It’s because I’m a muggleborn. Isn’t it?”

Theo takes a deep breath. He doesn’t want to shout, he doesn’t want to be adversarial but he also knows he shouldn’t lie. Not right now, not with everything at stake.

“Not exactly,” he says slowly. “You look at me like I’m everything that’s wrong with the wixen world.”

“You *are* a pureblood.”

Theo feels irritation rising up inside of him.

“So are the Weasleys.”

“It’s different, you know it is. They’re ... Gryffindors.” Granger looks at him sharply. “You’re very Slytherin.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I don’t,” Theo snaps. “You are going out with one of my best friends, who is, by the way, also a pureblood and a Slytherin.”

“It’s different!”

“You keep saying that and the only difference I can see is the Weasley’s are poor and Daphne’s a girl -,”

“You scare me!” Granger explodes. Theo stares at her.

“What?”

She sighs and pulls on the sleeves of her school jumper in irritation, clicking her teeth but before she can answer, there’s the sound of footsteps on the stairs. She looks around with wild eyes and then climbs onto Harry’s bed, pulling the hangings closed. Theo draws his legs up to his knees in the sudden darkness of the bed, both of them listening intently to the voices of Finnegan and Thomas beyond them.

“Potter-Black must already be asleep,” Finnegan says. “He’s so weird.”

“Sleeping is *weird*?”

“No, well, —,”

“Seamus, fucking let some stuff go, mate. I need to shower, I stink from Quidditch. You just stink.”

“Fuck off.”

“You do, did you set your hair on fire in charms again?”

“No, I didn’t —,”

They listen to the pair go into the bathroom, Granger’s eyes fixed on Theo. When they hear the bathroom door closes, Theo raises his wand.

“*Muffliato*, ” he whispers, and then, speaking in a normal voice: “What do you mean I scare you?”

“You’re a white boy born into incredible privilege and your father was a Death Eater who watched my *brother* be tortured!” Granger’s voice lowered to a virulent hiss. “You are the heir to a legendary dark, pure blood House, you carry a fucking *knife*, you’re incredibly smart and can brew Mastery level potions and you’ve shown your capable of killing. I’m a black muggleborn, I’m exactly what the majority white, Sacred Twenty Eight want to get rid of, a group that *your* Grandfather invented! Why *wouldn’t* I be scared of you?”

Theo closes his eyes. He’s a little ashamed that he’s never considered this. After all, if Hilary Lee was unsure about him and she was raised aware of wixen culture, how much more unsure would Granger be, a person who is used to persecution both in the wixen and muggle world? He sighs and pulls his feet even further away from her. He slowly sets his wand and his knife

on the pillow beside him. She watches him warily. He rolls up his sleeves to show he's got no more weapons. Granger has a tight grip on her own wand but doesn't seem to want to relinquish it. Theo feels like he can't blame her.

"You're incredibly smart too," he says quietly. "You brewed polyjuice potion in a toilet when you were twelve. There's a reason they call you the smartest witch in the year. You were singled out in our first year, you were the clever one, the fast learner –,"

"The Muggleborn *surprise*," Granger's eyes are flashing in the dim, grey darkness inside the bed curtains. "The Muggleborn *rising*. Every O I ever have gotten in my life might as well have said 'Outstanding - *for a muggleborn!*' You think I don't know racism when I see it?"

"You think I'm a racist? I'm in love with Harry."

"Harry isn't muggleborn. You might not discriminate based on race –,"

"So you think I'm a blood purist."

"I think your father was." She raises her eyebrows. "Do you believe that my judgement about Harry can be just as good as yours and not *in spite* of my background or because of it but because it's equal to yours?"

"Do you?" Theo asks. "Like you said, my father was a Death Eater, I'm the heir to a Dark House, I carry a knife, I'm privileged, I'm white, I'm male. Do you trust me to care for Harry as well as you do?"

Granger gives him a long look. Theo knows they both know they've reached an impasse. They both love Harry too much. They both see each other's flaws too clearly. Theo has no idea how to move forward so instead, they listen as the showers start to run. Theo can hear the distant sound of Finnegan singing badly in the shower and Thomas laughing at him. Clearly, Thomas' vow to the House of Black hasn't completely unsettled the friendship between them, even if Finnegan still hates Harry. Theo can't help fantasising about slipping into that bathroom in the invisibility cloak and casting a well-placed stinging hex on Finnegan in an unmentionable place.

"Terrible singer," Granger mutters.

"Tone deaf."

"You could slip out now," Theo suggests, but even as he does, he hears someone else climbing the stairs and opening the door. Just from the sound of the steps, Theo whispers: "Longbottom."

"How do you know?"

"The length of the gait. Weasley is much taller."

Granger looks annoyed by nods.

"Ron will doing drills with Ginny," she mutters.

“You’ll have to wait until they’ve gone to sleep.”

“Christ.” Granger checks her watch. “Could be hours.”

“Could be.”

Theo can think of nothing worse than this, to be trapped in a bed with Hermione bloody Granger unable to get rid of her and unable to say anything to make his own presence more bearable to her. *We don't like each other or trust each other, what more is there to say?*

“Let’s get to the heart of it then, since we’re stuck here,” Granger sighs, leaning carefully against one of the posts, her legs pulled up underneath her and her wand tight in her hand. “Take me out of it, take all of us out of it, take *Harry* out of it. If not for Harry, would you care about muggleborns dying?”

“I can’t answer that.”

It’s like trying to imagine a world without the sun.

“Why not?”

“Because if not for Harry, I’d still be living with my Aunt, my father would still be alive and controlling my life and I would probably have a Dark mark,” Theo says flatly. “If not for Harry, I’d be wearing a white mask and praying that the Dark Lord kills me before he forces me to kill other people. You’re asking me to imagine a situation where my entire world would be different, a locked cage I couldn’t get out of. There is no ‘if not for Harry’ for me.”

“But you grew up your entire life headed for that situation. Until a little over a year ago, it would have been your reality. You must know the answer.”

“Odin,” Theo rubs his face. Granger is nothing if not dogged in pursuit of knowledge. It’s exhausting, but he knows what she wants, what she needs to hear. He also knows he can’t give it to her. “We both know the answer to this. It’s a hypothetical, but we both know, so why are you asking? Do you just need to hear me say it?”

“Yes.” Granger’s jaw is set. “I do. I need to hear you say it.”

“Then I’ll say it.” Theo watches her brace and knows that whilst this is cruel, it would be crueller to lie. “If I didn’t love Harry, if the course of my life had not violently diverged, if instead, I were marked and still living with my Aunt and my father was alive and I was in the Dark Lord’s service I would care more about surviving his service than saving muggleborns.”

Granger stares at him, her eyes suddenly incredibly sad and disappointed. He knows it’s not what Harry’s like, always trying to save others even when he’s broken to pieces, but Theo doesn’t have that same instinct. What is the point in pretending he does? He knows he is capable of kindness; he wants to protect the people around him, he will do anything to keep Harry alive, but he is no martyr.

“Harry would have answered differently,” Theo admits.

“Yes.” Granger’s smile is pained.

“And Lupin, I think.”

“Yes,” Granger nods. “He’s a creature.”

Theo nods. It makes sense.

“But if Professor Snape answered differently from me, then neither of them currently be living,” he says. Granger stiffens.

“I know what you’re trying to say, that Harry and Remus and yes, maybe me, rely on Professor Snape turning away from people he could save in order to keep his position and keep us alive, but you and Professor Snape are *not* the same,” Granger’s voice is calm but her eyes are fiery. “And if you think I’m excusing him just because he’s not white, you’re dead wrong. I’m not excusing him anything, after everything he’s done in the past. Just like I’m not excusing you.”

Theo feels a tinge of respect that at least every former Death Eater or former–potential Death Eater are held to the same standard.

“I’m not asking to be excused. I’m not asking for anything. I know this proves to you that I’m some kind of monster.”

“I didn’t say that. I’ve not said anything,” she says. “But I do think it shows that you don’t value all wixen life the same.”

“I think it shows that in that hypothetical situation I would value my own life above everyone else’s,” Theo says.

“It’s not a hypothetical situation for me, that’s the difference between us, Nott.” Granger’s voice is bleak. “You talk like this is all done for you, lucky you, you’re not a Death Eater, but I’m always a muggleborn. If you left Harry tomorrow, if you left England tomorrow, there’s a chance that no one would care. I will always be hunted, simply for being a muggleborn. I always have to ask myself who will defend me or who would happily watch me die because they think their life is more valuable than mine.”

“I do not think your life is inherently less valuable than mine and I absolutely do not want you to die,” Theo says. Granger gives him a sharp, incisive look.

“Yes, but for Harry’s sake, right? Not for me,” she says derisively. Theo doesn’t know how to explain that there are very few people in this life whose deaths he is personally invested in actively avoiding. Besides, he knows Granger feels just the same about him. She would not miss him for his own merit, that much is certain.

“Granger, come on,” Theo tries to keep exasperation out of his voice. “If we didn’t have Harry, if you heard one day that Theo Nott, who you’ve never spoken to, had taken the mark and been killed by the Dark Lord, would you mourn *me*? Or would a part of you, deep down, be grateful there was one less Death Eater to face?”

“God, Nott, so your argument is whilst you wouldn’t be happy I’d died, you would be glad you didn’t have to kill me?”

“This is your hypothetical world, I’m just sitting in it. I know, I know,” he says as she opens her mouth. “Hatred of muggleborns is not hypothetical to you, but *you* do not have to worry if I will come to your defence. I’ll always raise my wand on your account now. We’re on the same fucking side.”

“Being on the same side isn’t the same as you being on my side,” Granger says.

“Vice versa, Granger.”

“I mean, it’s not the same as you being on the side of people *like* me,” she says. “Of muggleborns.”

Theo opens his mouth to say that he’s on Harry’s side, but then realises that would likely only increase Granger’s dislike of him. He closes his mouth and sighs, staring at his ring on his hand.

“Im on the side of wixen,” he says. “All wixen.”

“Can’t you hear how that sounds?” She shakes her head. “I ask you if you’re on the side of muggleborns, and you have to make them *wixen* in order to accept them –,”

“That’s not what I meant, I was attempting to be inclusive –,”

“It’s not inclusive if it’s erasure –,”

“How is it erasure to consider muggleborns as much wixen as pure bloods?”

Granger is cut off from answering by the sound of the bathroom door is opened, the sound of Finnegan’s singing increasing in volume, and then closed again.

“Did Harry watch Quidditch tonight?” Longbottom’s voice says.

“No, I think he went to bed early, his curtains were closed when I came in,” Thomas says. “Maybe his hands were hurting.”

“Maybe. Can I look at your Transfiguration homework?”

“Mine’s shit, Neville, did you ask Hermione?”

“She uses too many big words.”

Theo rolls his eyes, all too familiar with being thought too verbose, and at the exact moment, catches Granger doing the same.

“What word was too long?” He asks.

“Transmogrification,” she says.

“Ah. Could be worse. Could be transubstantiation.”

Granger’s smile is tight, followed by a fleeting, troubled look crosses her face. She looks down at her hands thoughtfully.

“We’ve always sort of got on, you and me, in Ancient Runes and stuff.”

“Yes.” Theo can admit it. She’s a good partner, if bossy sometimes.

“You like my work, you think I’m good at it.”

“I do.”

“But I’ve always felt ... I don’t know. That you still found me ... baffling in some ways. That you thought I should adjust to fit into the wixen world, be less muggle, become more wixen, let go of my culture to make space for *yours*. ” Theo doesn’t speak, because it’s strange to consider that actually, Granger has been watching and considering him for so long. “That’s muggleborn erasure, Nott. That’s the assumption that everything we’ve lived with, everything that’s made us in our first eleven years should just be dropped for wixen alternatives. Our fashion, our music, our politics, we should stop existing in that world and start existing in this one. Thinking muggleborns should fit in is basically telling me that perhaps, underneath, you were just like Malfoy and Parkinson. That you thought I shouldn’t be here.”

Theo sighs heavily and stares upwards at the canapé above Harry’s bed. Is Granger wrong? True, he has always found her baffling, but he’s never wished she wasn’t in the school or railed in the Slytherin common room against her, like Draco used to. In fact, until he got closer with Harry, he quietly admired her stoicism. There’s something about the combination, however, of having the attention of someone ferocious as Hermione Granger focused on him, always looking at him like he’s a threat to her beloved brother, that has burned away most of that admiration and replaced it with a mutual annoyance. Theo does not know how to explain any of it.

“I have, on occasion, been puzzled by why you would want to cling to muggle culture but that was before I understood exactly how appallingly badly taught Muggle Studies is. The textbooks are wildly out of date.”

“You’re telling me, I had to explain what the internet was.”

“If I was previously dismissive of muggle culture it was entirely due to a lack of education.”

“And you think you’re less dismissive now?” Granger raises her eyebrows.

“Nobody in their right mind should ever dismiss a culture capable of producing so many bloody poets and also such extremely deadly weaponry.”

Granger smirks, but doesn’t look like she wants to.

“So you respect what our culture creates. That isn’t the same as wanting integration. It’s not the same as wanting muggle culture in your culture, in Hogwarts.”

“I never once thought you should not be at Hogwarts. You wield a wand, that's the only entry requirement and I've not honestly considered the integration of muggle culture into wixen culture.”

“Yeah, because wixen culture doesn't encourage you to consider it!” Granger says hotly.

“But I'm not against it,” Theo says. “I've benefitted greatly from reading about muggle technology, I think other wixen would too, certainly it seems important that muggle studies be taught in the first two years of Hogwarts, not as an elective either –,”

“Yes, yes, I've thought this! Mr Weasley had no idea what batteries were and he ran a whole Ministry Department for Christ's sake!”

“Even down to education about currency, transport, and politics it seems ridiculous that such things aren't taught to young wixen who will meet muggleborns at school,” Theo's mind is running away with him.

“Yes! I thought it was crazy that wixen know so little about their own country, but expect me to know *everything* about theirs! I don't see them learning who the Prime Minister is!”

“Blaise says he's odious,” Theo says.

“And the Minister for Magic's a saint,” Granger rolls her eyes.

“Perhaps more pureblood would be less afraid of the muggle world if they were educated.”

“You're afraid of muggles?” Granger gives him a strange look.

“No,” Theo pauses. “But pureblood children are taught that the Statute of Secrecy is not there to protect muggles from us. It's to protect us from muggles. It's a ... common theme in pureblood rhetoric.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Granger's voice is icy. “So if you're not anti-muggle –,”

“I'm not –,”

“Then why is *this* happening?” She gestures between the two of them. Theo groans internally, because it seems Granger wants to illuminate every dark crevice of their dislike for one another. Still, she's asked, so he'll answer.

“If I have found you baffling in the past it is because you are often quick to criticise others and ... well, you're a teachers pet.”

“You're Snape's apprentice!”

“Yes, but you are showy with your prowess and always have been.”

“I'm enthusiastic!” Granger flushes. “And I'm in Gryffindor. Do you know how quickly the girls in my year tagged me as the smart one? Know-it-all Granger? I was never going to fit in

with them, I worked that out in the first two days, so I told myself I might as well be the smartest the *loudest*, because that's all Gryffindors care about. Volume."

"Sounds fucking exhausting," Theo mutters.

"It is." Granger's voice quietens, her eyes fixing on her knees. "But it got me Harry and Ron. And look, they're both disasters."

Theo can't help a slight snort of laughter. On this, they can both agree. Granger smiles tightly and goes on.

"I met Harry and I just ... he was so *bumbling*. Everyone was always staring, always judging, always *waiting* for him to be something or do something! I knew I had to be even smarter and even louder if I was going to protect him, I couldn't just be clever, everyone had to *know* he had a clever best friend so they thought twice about bullying him. So yes, I was showy with my prowess, because I thought if they *knew* he wasn't alone, he had the witch in the year who could cast fast and learn quickly, they'd think twice."

"That's ..." Theo struggles for the right word. "Very loyal."

"God, do you hear yourself?" She shakes her head. "The way you say that word, like it's a synonym for 'so fucking stupid they might as well be a carrot.'"

"I don't mean that, it's just not how things are done in Slytherin. Snape instructs all of the students in his house to keep their heads down, to rise high silently, to be unseen and deadly. So yes, in the past I've found your ... enthusiasm to be counter intuitive to what I know." Theo pauses. "I understand it better now."

"Right, we both *understand* but it doesn't change the fact that you still don't like my company," Granger folds her arms and gives him a deadly stare.

"You've made it very clear you don't enjoy my company either!"

"I don't like you because *you* don't like me!" Granger glares. "So *why*? Is it literally just because you find the fact that I'm *loyal* and performative with my skills *distasteful*?"

Theo groans and rubs his face. It's hideous, this dissection of a relationship with a person he never expected to be so connected to, but he recognises the necessity of it. Besides, for some reason, he doesn't want Granger to have the wrong idea about him. So no matter how unbearable, he grits his teeth and plows ahead.

"Do you really want to do this?" He asks, hoping that she might just agree to continue to dislike him and never give a reason why, like any good Slytherin, but of course she nods her head firmly, like a bloody *Gryffindor*, and he's forced to start to say the worst things. "It's Harry."

Her expression doesn't change but something shifts in her eyes, something almost victorious.

"Go on," her voice is cold.

"Since Harry and I began ... being together you've changed your attitude towards me. Before, you didn't look twice at me unless we were Runes partners and we were always polite to one another –,"

"Before you weren't in a relationship with my brother."

"Before he wasn't your brother."

"He's *always* been my brother," Granger's voice is heated.

"Well, since I've been involved with your brother you act like I'm responsible for every bad choice he makes, like I'm going to poison Harry simply because my father was a Death Eater," Theo can't stop the words spilling out. "You're so fucking judgemental, you think you can criticise me for everything our government does wrong, everything *any* pureblood does wrong is my fault –,"

"Welcome to the existence of muggleborns, Nott," Granger's eyes are sharp and fierce.

"Anything a muggleborn does reflects on *all* of us, I put a foot wrong and someone says 'well, that's what you get for letting in muggleborns!' I expect every day to be judged by my blood status and you call me judgemental? Guess what, I am fucking *judging* you! Because people who look and act exactly like you have been judging me and legislating against me and finding ways to legally oppress me since I turned up in this world and you *benefit* from all of that! You, personally! You're a white, pureblood Lord Apparent with one of the *worst* voting records for muggleborn rights in the Wizengamot and I am *judging* you because I am waiting to find out if you are any fucking different!"

Theo wasn't aware that Granger kept track of voting records but he supposes he shouldn't be surprised.

"Then wait," he says. "Wait and see, because I am *not* my father, I care about magic and knowledge, about potions and arithmancy and above fucking all, I care about keeping Harry *alive*. You need me to prove it differently with a voting record? Then watch. As for who I am today, you're judging me by a metric that's entirely skewed."

"How?"

Theo's heart is pounding so fast that he actually can't stop himself from answering honestly.

"The culture of pureblood supremacy that you think I grew up in, the culture that you expect me to treasure the way Daphne and Blaise treasure the cultures they were raised in didn't *exist* for me. Not in Apollonius' house. He had me kill my first human being at ten years old, do you think I cared what his voting record was, do you think I noticed when all I was trying to do in that house was fucking *survive*? I didn't look at it properly until after he was dead! Forget it," Theo shakes his head, unable to account for the sudden tightness in his throat. "Let's just forget it. I'll be wrong, you be right, I don't fucking care, let's forget it."

Granger looks at him for a long time. Together, they listen to Finnegan coming to bed and Thomas talking Longbottom through the Transfiguration homework and then the sounds of

Longbottom going to the bathroom whilst Thomas and Finnegan talk about Quidditch. It's so thoroughly boring that it's enough for Theo to get himself under control.

"I don't want to forget it," she says. Theo shoots daggers at her with his eyes but Hermione fucking Granger only shoots them back, just as hard. "This is hard. I get it. But it's hard for both of us and we're doing this because it's the right thing to do, for Harry, for me, for you. So we finish."

Theo sighs and closes his eyes. She's right. It might be a difficult and painful conversation for both of them but Theo is not a man who leaves a task unfinished and he imagines Hermione Granger has not so much as an unfinished post-it in her life. He nods, wearily. Granger straightens her shoulders. She uncurls her feet and slowly reaches for Theo's knife on the pillow, raising her eyes to ask permission and Theo nods. She turns it in her hand gingerly, in a way that tells Theo that Granger has no experience handling weapons.

"We thought it might be this, Ron and I," she says. "We imagined that ... well, there was only one thing that could bring you and Harry together so quickly."

Theo doesn't have a response to that, because what could he possibly say?

"It's not poisonous, Granger, grip it properly, hold it full in your palm," he instructs. "Yes, like that."

"Did he really make you kill someone before you were eleven?" She asks.

Theo nods.

"Always hold a blade away from your body," he says. "It's very sharp, you could nick yourself."

Granger obeys him but looks very disturbed.

"Did you ... want to?"

Theo sighs and knocks his head softly against the headboard.

"Want has so little to do with it."

"What do you mean?"

Granger has managed to switch the blade to the corkscrew and doesn't seem to know how to change it back. He holds his palm out flat for it and she drops it in, slowly. Quickly, he reblades it and then flips it closed, setting it back down on the bed between them. As he looks at it there, closed and quiet, he decides Granger can have this story. This small glimpse into the past. Maybe it will help.

"The week after my mother died, Apollonius beat me until I couldn't stand. He told me if I obeyed his every word, no one would ever harm me like he had. I would be too strong of a soldier to let them," Theo shook his head ruefully. "Soldiers follow orders. They don't have

to believe anything. All they care about is surviving the mission. Want didn't matter. Nothing I thought or felt mattered. Only him."

"You were ... a child soldier."

Granger looks at him as if she's really seeing him for the first time. Theo can tell how this information is recalibrating her opinion of him, just as her sharp insights into the reality of living muggleborn has begun to recalibrate his.

"I *am* a soldier. I am a warrior. I am a Nott," Theo feels his throat tightening. "You think I was bred to hate muggleborns but I wasn't. This is all I was bred for."

"Is that ... is that what you want to be?"

"No." Theo looks away blinking. He doesn't want to show even an ounce of weakness in front of Granger, but he can't exactly hide the fact that he's clearing his throat, fighting back a stinging feeling in his eyes. "The Nott magic is healing magic, used on the battlefield mainly to heal our own but I ... my mother was a healer. I wanted to be a healer."

"You'd ... probably be good at that, the theory side." Granger admits. "Your bedside manner would be shit."

Theo snorts with laughter. Granger smiles warily. She looks tired and cautious and he thinks, suddenly, how incredibly brave Hermione Granger truly is. To have a conversation with a man she believes capable of killing her. It is a different type of politics to what he is used to; that which focuses on never telling your opponenet the absolute truth, but if its possible to come out of a situation no longer opponents, is that not more transformative? It is different from what he and Daphne and Blaise have been painstakingly endeavouring in Slytherin, but is it not the type of revolution that they will need, eventually? Perhaps people like Theo are needed to fight wars like these so people like Granger can transform whatever comes after it.

"I am seeing now how my privilege has blinded me in the past, how unaware I have been of the world beyond wixen life. I am becoming more aware every day and I know ... that whatever I suffered from Apollonius doesn't change how I have benefited from being pureblood." Theo says cautiously. "And I apologise for calling you judgemental."

"I am judgemental," Granger says. "But I will watch how you manage your Wizengamot seat. Hopefully you'll give me something better to judge you by."

"Hopefully."

"And ... I'm sorry for judging you based on the actions of your father and ... other things."

"Other things?"

Granger sighs in irritations and twists one of her curls nervously.

"Look, me being wary of you around Harry, it's not *all* about your background, some of it's about ... Cedric."

“Diggory,” Theo says flatly. Then, looking at Granger’s tearful face, realises what she means. “You’re talking about the tower. That time.”

Granger nods and sniffs, rubbing her nose with the sleeve of her jumper.

“He didn’t love Cedric like he loves you, he’s not loved anyone like he loves you.” Theo’s stomach churns at her perception. Their bond makes their love unique. He wonders how close Granger is in her centre of her inquiring mind to figuring out what is truly going on between him and Harry. “But however much he did care about Cedric, it was enough to ... to take him up to the tower. At first, I worried that you would leave him when it got rough and he’d be even worse –,”

“I’ll never leave him.”

“You can’t promise that,” Granger shakes her head. “None of us can, especially not now. Losing you would send him over the edge.”

“Losing *you* would send him over the edge,” Theo says. “All we can do is both try to survive.”

“And get Harry to survive.”

Theo remembers how he felt the very first time he and Granger realised they were connected through Harry, whilst in Ancient Runes. He remembers the sensation that she was the first person he had met who possibly, cared about Harry as deeply and truthfully as he did. Things have become more complicated since then, but Theo knows that fact hasn’t changed one bit.

“He’s getting better,” Theo says softly. “He values himself more.”

“Thanks to Snape and Remus. And you.”

Theo takes a deep breath. It feels, finally, like they are coming out the other side. There is only one last thing that must be said. Theo knows it doesn’t change his past mistakes and misconceptions, but maybe honesty can pave the way forward towards something different. A place where they do more than understand one another’s points in an argument, to a place where they know one another better.

“Granger.”

“Yes?”

“The Dark Lord killed my mother,” Theo watches Granger’s eyes widen and knows Harry has not told her this fact, but somehow, it feels right to tell her. Theo thinks that Medea Nott would have liked Hermione Granger very much. *An earnest girl*, he can imagine her saying, *a good friend for you, Theodore*. “Even though Apollonius never told me this, I think even in my own way, I intuited that the Dark Lord was somehow responsible for the desolation of my family. From the time I entered Hogwarts I had hoped to form a different path for myself. It’s why Blaise and I are friends.”

“You hoped Voldemort would never come back.”

"I never expected that he would but ..." Theo takes a deep breath. "I like to think, at least I hope, that even if I had not met Harry I would have had the firmness of my convictions, the fire of desire for vengeance for my mother, to avoid being marked. To fight against it. To fight him and ... everything he stood for. To change."

Granger gives him a long look and then nods. Theo shuffles slightly, moving his wand and knife and she moves to sit beside him, her head leaning against Harry's pillow.

"Sometimes I wonder about what would have happened if Harry wasn't my best friend," Granger says. "If I had gone to Ravenclaw. That's where the sorting hat thought about putting me."

"Me too."

When the Sorting Hat offered the path, Theo deferred it. To a child, the approval of a parent is like the sun. Theo knew that Apollonius would not want a Ravenclaw son.

"Really? We might have been friends."

"Or academic rivals."

"A friendly academic rivalry, then."

"Perhaps that is the best we can manage, under the circumstances."

"We have to try harder," Granger mutters tiredly. "You're in love with my brother."

"You're the sister of the boy I love."

"Say boyfriends, Nott, it's not that hard." Granger's smirk is becoming more certain.

"Certainly a shorter word than transubstantiation."

"Because it's the length that's the problem."

"Well." She huffs thoughtfully. "You could always go with *inamorato* instead of boyfriend."

"That's the same amount of letters."

"Well. Like you said. It's clearly not the length of the word that's the problem."

Theo snorts with laughter.

"I know we're not friends," he says. "But I do respect you."

Granger turns her head, her black curls spread on the pillow next to him, to look at him.

"I respect you too. I guess that will have to be enough for now." Her eyes take on a slightly mischievous look. "But I still think you're an *arse*."

"Most people do."

Harry calls him an arse all the time, and as long as he's allowed to think that Granger is a know-it-all, then it's fine.

"So we'll do our best," Granger nods firmly. "We don't have to like each other but we'll protect one another and we'll keep him safe. Yes?"

She twists her face upward towards him, eyes wide and honest and Theo sees in them all the love she has for her brother.

"Yes," Theo nods. "We will. If you can trust me."

"I will. Can you trust me?"

Theo isn't sure. There is so much he cannot change about himself, so much he fights to change every day, but he can choose things too. This is what he will choose to do. Because Harry is off somewhere doing something he doesn't know and Theo still needs to fight for the people around him and fight for Harry, just as Granger does.

"I will," he says definitely. "I'm on your side, Granger."

"Yeah," Granger gives him a long, steady look that for the first time, has the tiniest hint of trust inside it. Or at the very least, understanding. "I think I believe you are."

Theo smiles, because whilst change is hard, whilst he feels the challenge of growth inside him every day, stretching him with every new radical encounter that Harry has brought into his life, it is not without its rewards. Anyone would be a fool not to think any side with Hermione Granger on it has a better chance of winning.

"Then nothing can stop us, can it?" he says.

How to Split a Soul

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

TRIGGER WARNING: Discussion of Suicidal thoughts.

This time, Harry and Severus and Magnus start to find a way out of the woods.
Next time, REMUS.

Severus has listened in a daze as his son recounts the contents of his evening to Magnus Bane as they both sit in front of a grand fireplace in the study at Ludlow Castle. It is clearly in the middle of Kreacher's cleaning efforts, some pieces of furniture still draped with sheets and boxes of Bane's books, still waiting to be unpacked. The plan has always been for Bane to remove here, to have it as an option for Harrison in the United Kingdom, a castle that can be easily fortified and strengthened. After tonight, Severus thinks it might be best to keep Harrison here, yet the idea of being in a different room from the child is abhorrent. The urge to have his son sitting beside him, to be able to keep the tethers between them taut and close and feel his breath moving through his miraculously still living body is almost overwhelming but Severus will not crowd the child. Not now he's finally stopped shaking and his eyes have stopped shining with that crushing, perpetual despair. So Severus sits and listens, catalogues every millisecond of his child's breath and tries to get the hideous tower and Narcissa's terrible words out of his head. *Scrying is not a precise science*, he scolds himself. *Just because she saw the tower in Harrison's future does not mean anything*. Still, he knows it will haunt his every waking moment for the rest of his life.

"Let me get this straight in my head, Harry." Severus watches as Magnus Bane lights a cigarette thoughtfully. "You discovered a journal belonging to Tom Riddle, written in parseltongue and formally in the possession of the late Lord Nott and within its pages, you uncovered the truth that Tom Riddle not only made horcruxes, he made two living horcruxes, one a snake and one you."

It is a stunning, miraculous and terrifying discovery.

"Yep." Harrison is drinking a hot chocolate and looks a lot calmer than before. "Do you want to see it?"

Severus does. Even if he can't understand it, he wants to see the terrible words on paper, the admission of the Dark Lord's terrible act and everything it means for his son. Bane shakes his head.

“It will be of little value to us, since we can’t read it, but if you can take the time to read it all the way through, it might give some insight.”

Harrison pulls a face into his hot chocolate.

“Why?” Severus asks. When his son looks up into his eyes, it’s like Harrison understands exactly what he’s asking for. As if the moment of intensity inside the power of the Prince magic has shifted something between them. *Why are you afraid of this, after everything else there is to be afraid of?*

“I don’t like thinking how ... connected we are. That when I read his writing I can’t read it in English, I hate that. Also, what if there’s something worse? Like, God, I don’t fucking know, *anything* –,”

“It is unlikely. He perished in Godric’s Hollow, he had no more time for nefarious schemes.” Severus pauses. “I will read it with you.”

Harrison pauses, blowing on the hot liquid, and nods.

“Okay.”

“I think Severus is correct, his most nefarious scheme was not not make a living horcrux as you are but to make ... forgive my phrasing, but a soul matryoshka?”

“What does that mean?” Harrison has melted marshmallow on his lip.

“A Russian doll. Hollow inside, filled with other dolls.”

Severus closes his eyes against it, the vileness and horror of it rising. He imagines if it had been successful, a Dark Lord with a secondary vessel, a living, talking soul piece with no mind but his. Then imagines how it would have felt to learn, somehow, that the stolen vessel was none other than his son. The disgust is virulent, moving through his body as a wave and his hands are clenching into fists. He does not mean to, but tightens the tether between him and his son, jerking his wrist a little so he spills a little hot chocolate. Harrison shoots him a worried look.

“Forgive me,” Severus lets out a slow breath and allows the fact that Harrison is here, somehow a horcrux but miraculously, *wondrously*, somehow still himself calm him. The tether softens and Harrison takes another sip. “Go on, Bane.”

“So upon deciphering this information you were, understandably, quite despairing and went to the Tower with the intent of ending your life –,”

“But I didn’t,” Harrison interrupts, throwing a nervous glance at Severus. He never thought he’d be so crushingly relieved at those three small words. He gives Harrison the only kind of nod he can manage, a curt one, and Bane goes on.

“Yes. You were interrupted by our Lady Death.”

“Yes.”

Severus sees Harrison inside his mind, standing on the edge of the tower. He had been sure, in that moment, that his own heart would never beat again. Yet here he is, here both of them are. Harrison is alive, that is all that matters.

“Lady Death also extrapolated that the reason for your survival in Godric’s Hollow was ... for want of a better word, a whim of the universe?”

“If that’s what we can call a seemingly arbitrary magical balance struck between the magical efforts my mother and Lily,” Severus can’t help but say.

“And the Black Prince,” Harrison adds.

“Oh, yes, forgive me, I forgot about the dead Dark Lord.”

Severus does not want to be flippant or hysterical but it is *absurd*, so much of it is unbearable, yet somehow, the idea that Eileen’s death contributed in some unfathomable magical way to Harrison’s survival is the least bearable of all. It wounds him in a way he is in no way prepared to process. Severus does not know how to accept this, he wants books and facts and papers, he wants a peer reviewed study of the words of Lady Death but how can he argue with a deity? He promised his son he believed him and he does, he cannot help but believe, it has been baked inside him by Eileen but it is astonishing how deeply he wishes he did *not* believe. He has never felt his inherited spirituality conflicting with his rationality, all his life he has kept them separate and when Eileen died, it felt like her beliefs died with her but then there was Harrison. Demanding all of him, his rationality, his intellect, and now his belief, forcing them to bleed into one another. He challenges everything inside him so Severus *must* believe the absurd, the unlikely, the impossible because without the impossible, his child would not be breathing. Strangely, it’s Eileen’s voice in his head: *we guard the ancient magics, the veil, the Mages, Sev. We do not ask why we do, we only guard.*

“And Lady Death also suggested that the moments in your life when you could have died have not dislodged your horcrux?” Bane says.

“Yeah, getting a bit chilly and magical exhaustion don’t kill horcruxes,” Harrison sips his drink. “Just people. Kinda lucky too, because apparently it could have tethered me here.”

“What?” Severus demands.

“That could be true, I suppose, that you couldn’t die whilst tethered to Riddle,” Bane says. “Although maybe you were tethered by other bonds, or perhaps tethered by purpose.”

“By *purpose*? Can we refrain from this language of predestination and call it what it *is*? Harrison’s own magical stamina in Privet Drive, the properties of phoenix tears and the healing abilities of myself and Molly Weasley to bring a wixen back from a cardiac incident in Grimmauld Place! There were *choices* made here, we are not all at the whim of the cosmos!” He cannot bear the idea. Mostly, because he is tense and terrified against the notion that fate or the universe of whatever it can be called is pushing his son towards his death. He remembers him and Lupin sitting on the steps of Spinner’s End the night Bane arrived, deciding prophecy be damned. “Your father and I have been very clear about this, Harrison,

we do not *care* what the universe decides or what the cosmos wills, your fate is yours, your choices are yours.”

“I understand that but I made a choice in Grimmauld Place,” Harrison looks at Severus. “I chose that, and Death chose not to take me because she has her *purpose*. She made a choice behind the veil too, and I chose to be part of that. I don’t take it back. You need to accept that.”

“I do not need to be reminded of anything that happened in Grimmauld Place and you will not tell me what I need to accept when it comes to your *life* –”

“If I can stay on track,” Bane says softly, and Severus can practically hear the knowing sympathy dripping in his voice. Severus stares at his son. Harrison’s jaw is set tightly, just as it always with when he is that turbulent combination of defiant and emotional. Severus wants to tell him that he will fight fate itself for Harrison to live and be happy, but he cannot seem to get the words past his tight throat. So he clenches the tethers between them, as gently as he can bear. Harrison’s face softens.

“I know,” Harrison says. *I know I am not set in stone*. Severus is not sure how long this easy understanding between them will last, but he is intensely grateful for it. Severus gives his son a curt nod. Bane leans forward, gently inserting himself back into the unspoken conversation.

“And then you had a discussion with Albus?” Bane says.

“And he confirmed that he has, in fact, known or suspected this about Harrison for years,” Severus answers.

There is rage and betrayal in this fact, enough to drown in, but Severus will not do it. He will stay afloat for Harrison. Bane gives Severus a long look and, with a fluid movement of his hand, charms a tumbler full of whisky into each of their hands. Without blinking, both of them drink. Severus does not need occlumency to understand Bane’s thoughts: *this is a motherfucking shit show*. Harrison looks between them nervously and when they have both swallowed the last drop, Bane turns back to Harrison.

“Tell us your plan, Harry.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not a plan, exactly, just a couple of thoughts, really,” Harrison turns his mug in his hands. “I remembered what you said, Mags, about the magic your Dad invented in the Potter grimoire, soul magic, a way I could keep the horcruxes.”

“You intend to use Riddle’s own horcruxes against him?”

“It’s about timing, surely, it must be about timing,” Harrison leans forward, looking earnestly between them. “I’ve been thinking about this and Dumbledore’s plan was to wait until the horcruxes were all gone and then kill me as his last horcrux, and then kill Tom. That’s not a totally flawed plan. Wait, wait, here me out!”

Harrison holds his hand up against Severus who opens his mouth, scowls, closes it and then taps his glass against Bane’s for a refill. It happens immediately, the bottle appearing by

Severus' elbow. He fills it almost to the brim, for fortification and then nods at Harrison to go on.

"Okay, so look, if we take me out of the equation, the plan's sound, isn't it? It's to disable Tom the most that we possible can, secretly, and then at the last minute, duel him and kill him before he even realises that he's properly mortal again, right? It's just like Quidditch, you build up the points until you're sure you can win and *then* catch the snitch! That's a sound plan!"

"Yes, if one does not consider duelling a megalomaniac to be at all challenging," Severus says. "The Dark Lord mortal is still the Dark Lord, Harrison."

"Yeah and even a Dark Lord can get run over by a bus as long as he's mortal!" Harrison eyes shine bright for a second, just as gold and green as they did when the darkness of the *Ghare Tareaqi* surrounded them. "As long as he's mortal, we've got a chance, I know we do. I know I'm only sixteen but it's not *just* me, is it? It's you and it's Magnus and Remus and Bill and Narcissa, you can't tell me that between all of you, you don't have as much knowledge and power as he does! And then there's ... well, there's me stuff. The Death stuff." Harrison takes a slow sip of hot chocolate, his eyes fixing on the middle distance. "It can't be that I survived all this for fucking nothing. There has to be ... balance."

Severus does not know whether it is youthful hope or madness so he simply stares at Bane. *Tell my son he cannot do this. Tell him he has no hope. Tell me to take him away from all of this.* Bane gives him a sad, almost pitying look and turns back to Harry.

"Putting our cumulative capabilities aside, even if we do consider it to be, as you put it, a sound plan, it is a plan that still relies in the end upon the destruction of the horcruxes rather than the containment of them, as you suggested, and, not to put too finer a point on it –,"

"It relies ultimately upon your death," Severus says. "Which is unacceptable. What have I told you about valuing your own life?"

"I do value it," Harrison's eyes are dull. "As much as it's mine to value."

"What does that mean?"

"I think Harry is realising that immortal beings struggle to value what they feel they cannot lose," Bane says. "What is death to he who will be the Master of it?"

Severus' blood runs cold. He puts his glass down and reaches for Harrison's hands, forcing their tethers into visible existence. He thinks he sees Bane smile fondly out of the corner of his eye but Severus focuses entirely on his son.

"It is this," he says. "This tether does not survive that crossing. Say She Who Walks the Shadowed World is right, say there is a destiny awaiting you where your next life is in her service, that you will live forever as her Master in realms beyond this one. Perhaps that will be possible for you, I cannot say, but Death does not *live*, Harrison. It is not *this* life. There is a difference between existing there and living here."

Harrison swallows hard. That same unending, heart wrenching despair is creeping into his green eyes again.

“Is there? Is this living?” he says. “Because I ... don’t know.”

Severus squeezes the child’s hand. *Live, you absolute mythic monster of a child. Live because if you do not, I will cease to exist with you.* The thought does not surprise him with its surety. He did not know until this evening how impossible it is for him to survive this war without Harrison. Now it is as much a fact of his body as his beating heart and sweating brow and Severus finds himself in a monstrously familiar place; trying to encourage his son to do the hardest thing and stay alive.

“This can get better,” Severus says. “I will not say it will, but it can.”

“Optimistic bastard.”

“Language,” Severus says. “You speak of balance. If there must be balance in all things, then there must be hope weighed in the balance of this situation.”

“*You* are hopeful?” Harrison’s voice is scathing.

“You are my hope.”

He sees Harrison’s eyes widen, as they sometimes do when Severus surprises him and he presses on.

“I do not care if we win, I do not care if the Dark Lord takes every planet under the sun, it means nothing to me if you are gone.”

“You don’t mean that. You care. You want him dead.”

“I want you to live.”

He remembers the morning Harrison woke in the Giardino, his question of whether Severus wanted the Dark Lord dead for all the suffering he had caused. Despite the Dark Lord’s efforts to make life unbearably worse since that summer morning, Severus’ answer has not changed. Nothing has changed, in the essence of it. Despite everything dreadful that has happened and could happen, Harrison’s most likely threat to his life still comes from within himself. Yet something at least is different. Severus knows, or at least hopes, his words carry more weight. So he speaks more truthfully than he would ever care to, witnessed by Magnus bloody Bane.

“There is no consolation for me in victory if you sacrifice yourself,” Severus goes on. “There is no comfort for myself, for Lupin, for Theodore or your sister in knowing that you exist on another plane of being where we cannot touch you and help you and watch you grow. Just as there is no comfort for Lupin in knowing that Black exists in your Grim.”

“There’s a little bit,” Harrison’s voice is desperate. “Right?”

“Only for you, who are used to so little comfort. You have existed for so long with only the shades of those you have loved, your mother in the dementors, your stepfather in the Mirror of Erised. You do not understand what torture it would be for those who have loved you to have only a shadow of you. I do not wish back shades of your mother, or shades of Regulus. I will have them alive or I shall wait until I see them undead, when I am perished and we may be together. In between is not enough. It should not be enough for you, either. You deserve more, *farzandam*.”

“Mum died for me, James too,” Harrison grips his hand. “Sirius as well.”

Severus hears the unsaid words so clearly: *if there must be balance, isn't my death the balance? As they gave life so others might live, why shouldn't I?*

“No.” Severus cannot say it strongly enough. “No.”

“You can't just say no.”

“I can. No. They did not die *for* you, that is what Albus says to make himself feel better about the soldiers he has lost because wars need martyrs, but they did not *give* their lives away. They fought valiantly and they were *killed* by the Dark Lord and Bellatrix LeStrange. They were taken. Life is too short already, *farzandam*. We do not give it away. We stand together and we fight with every ounce of our breath and will and magic and perhaps there is a day when those who fight us are faster and we are taken too, but we will not *give* it.”

Harrison's eyes are closed and Severus knows how long he has borne the burden of the deaths of others. Severus decides it has gone on long enough.

“You are my heir and my child and I say that I do not care who has died or might die, I do not care if our fighting comes to nothing and the Dark Lord reigns in perpetuity, you will not give away your one precious life upon this earth for his demise. You will fight, Harrison. You will live.”

Harrison takes a shuddering breath. The grip on Severus' hand is so strong. Severus worries for a second he has pushed too hard, he has given too much of his own furious, catastrophic love for this child in his words but then Harrison opens his eyes.

“Okay,” Harrison's eyes are full of unshed tears. “Yeah.”

The victory is astonishing, like a shot of heroin in the heart, two words containing so much hope and joy and violent gratitude. Severus is absolutely elated and absolutely cannot show it. So he counts backwards in dutch and then, very gently, nods his head.

“Thank you.”

“But this isn't self-sacrifice, I promise,” Harrison says. “This is a real plan.”

“Tell us, Harry,” Bane says. Harrison shakes his whole body a little, like a worried dog, and Severus understands completely, the need to physically move the conversation. He himself reaches for his whiskey glass, thinking it is the sweetest he has tasted.

“What if ...” Harrison hesitates and Severus sees the worry in his eyes that he will be called stupid so Severus squeezes his hand. *Go on.* “What if I keep the horcruxes? I don’t destroy them, not until the very last minute when we’ve got Tom exactly where we want him, where we *know* we can beat him and then ... then what if I use necromancy to ... to destroy them?”

Severus understands Harrison’s hesitancy. These are skills he may have but he doesn’t understand them, he does not have words for them, there are no spells or methods.

“Tell me how you think you could do that.”

“Like I did with the obscurus,” Harrison frowns, as if he doesn’t know how to explain it.

“Lady Death was there then, she taught me how to do it, how to ... to send something on, a part of a soul. I could do it again, I think.”

“Harry, we are going to probe this theory, not because it is not good but because we must be sure about what is possible and what is impossible,” Bane blows out smoke and waits until Harrison has nodded to keep speaking. “I have some knowledge of horcruxes, only a little, but I know this. They are toxic objects. To carry them physically is like carrying a weight that attracts ill intent and spells cast with malice. It is not a secretive way to be. As long as they hold being in their vessels, they hold their will. It is not inconspicuous.”

“I ... uh, I ...” Harrison swallows. “I had a thought about that though. That ... that maybe we could take them out of their vessels and then ... keep them closer.”

“How close?” Severus narrows his eyes, feeling trepidation mount inside him. Harrison slowly taps his head.

“Absolutely not!” Severus leaps to his feet, sloshing whisky down his robes, all of his relieved composure after navigating his child through a moment of mental self-destruction shattered. “How can you possibly even consider such a bloody riddiculous –,”

“Severus,” Bane uses a violent forcefield to sit him back down in his chair. “Breathe.”

Severus does. Harrison is very still, looking at him warily. Severus closes his eyes and forces himself to recount the ingredients in Harrison’s headache reliever. When he is finished, he looks up and finds that his son is holding his hand. *Listen*, a voice inside him whispers. He could almost fancy it is Lily. Severus can’t speak but he nods, tautly, and Harrison goes on.

“I’m already housing one and it’s okay, you know? I’m still myself.”

“He speaks into your mind, you hear one another’s thoughts,” Severus says. “It is not okay.”

“Yeah, it’s not *ideal* –,”

Severus can’t help the almost manic bark of laughter that leaps out of his mouth. So much of this is so far from ideal he thinks he’s forgotten what it is. But then there is the memory of Lupin reading poetry to their sleeping child after dinner on the sofa whilst he marks papers.

“But you taught me how to keep him out, you can teach me how to do this.” Harrison’s voice is firm. “You told me about the suicide pill, occlumency that locks things away, really deep?”

Kind of like what mum did with the spell to hide the memory of me from you? What if I built a box in my brain, not a box a ... a cupboard, and when the horcrux vessel was destroyed I took it into my mind and put it in the cupboard? The shards, they would want to come to me, I think, because I know their song.”

Harrison’s eyes are suddenly distant and Severus has the horrible feeling he is listening to someone else’s voice. *Lady Death’s*.

“What does she say?” Bane asks.

“That the shards will follow like for like. Magic listens when I call. Weapons will destroy a vessel and shard if there is no one to call them, that’s what we’ve done so far, but if weapons destroy the vessel and I call then the shards will come and ...” Harrison wrinkles his nose. “Rest.”

Severus’ arm hair rises and his back feels sweaty. It is one thing to hear his son speak of Death so casually, but to have messages relayed to him in this fashion, a strange, unfamiliar cadence that doesn’t even sound like Harrison, is a level of uncanny that Severus was not prepared for.

“Just because it is theoretically possible, does not mean it is possible for you.”

And just because Death told you to do something, doesn’t mean I’m going to allow it.

“But she told me I have the capacity,” Harrison leans forward. “Besides, they’re not *big* bits, Hermione says, because the earliest horcruxes have been done. Those were the really big chunks, so it’s only smaller bits left. I’ll keep the horcrux bits in my mind cupboard with my other bit and then, when we’re ready, I’ll send them to death from there. Like a postbox.”

“How will you ‘send them to death’?” Severus asks.

“I don’t fucking know, magic?” Harrison snarks.

“Language.”

“You’re the one that asked.”

“Because we have to know!”

“And I *know* I’ll use some magic!”

“It is all well and good to say ‘magic,’ Harrison, but what reasonable magic would achieve this?”

“I don’t know! I don’t *know* what makes fucking no sense or if I’m being stupid, because I’ve met *Death* and I killed someone with Prongs and I’ve seen Merlin and I’m a Mage and Theo’s a Sorcerer and Luna’s a Fae and we’re three together and that all means *something* and NONE of it makes SENSE but it’s all REAL!” Harrison’s voice has grown to a shout. “Shouldn’t you know? The two of you? You’re the fucking occlumens and ancient half mage, you’re the ones who should know!”

“Language!” It’s almost ridiculous, how his child can break his heart with love one second and drive him to fucking distraction the next. “You do not need to bellow when I am only asking for a reasonable explanation of how you might do this –,”

“But how can it be unreasonable? I can drown things in my mind, I can open the nothing place! How can anything be unreasonable when I can *feel* Theo’s feelings when we’re miles apart and hear Sahara’s voice and Death’s voice? When we have a magical tether between us and you can take thoughts out of my mind when I leave them for you and you *know* ...” Harrison’s voice drops to nothing, eyes glassy. “You know how to take care of me and you make me potions and read me books and you want me around. You and Remus. You *care* about me, and ... it’s *real*. So how can hiding soul bits in my mind be impossible?”

Severus cannot answer. Not even with the Dark Lord’s wand to his head could he answer. Instead, he looks at Bane, whose eyes are also glassy. Again, Bane seems to be of a single mind with him, because it is Harrison’s innocence, the magic he finds in being wanted that makes everything else extraordinary. Severus wonders, possibly, if Harrison’s lack of limits comes from this alone; being loved after a lifetime of being taught love was a fairytale. What can real life myths and fairytales compare to that? Harrison simply does not imagine limits, because what limits can be set now? For him, magic is the impossible made real.

“Ceilings, Harrison,” Severus manages to say. “Do you remember when we talked about the ceilings?”

“Yeah. You think this is my magical ceiling? I can’t do it?”

“Did you learn, in primary school, how ancient scholars once thought the world the sun revolved around the earth?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Our world, magical lore, how we understand what we are all capable of, it is the world at the centre of the universe.” Severus takes a deep breath. “What you are, what might be possible for you, it is as if you are the sun, Harrison.”

“You’re saying ... I’m new. I’m a new way of thinking about things,” Harrison says slowly. “But mages have been around for ages, right? I can’t be new.”

“There is something to be said about ... cultural limitations,” Severus speaks hesitantly, glancing to Bane for help, who smiles.

“You never had anyone telling you the earth is the centre of the universe, Harry,” Bane says. “You have no limits to your magical imagination. You have no limits to your expectations of what magic can do and perhaps because you have no concept of the limit, neither does the magic around you, or perhaps it is the other way around and there is something unique to your Mage abilities that unleashes magic’s full potential, but the point is ... we don’t know fully what you can do.”

That’s not entirely the point, Severus realises, and he needs to be honest with son and speak the worst words inside him.

“I cannot teach you,” he admits painfully. “I cannot guide you to be this, or to be a Mage, I am ... limited. I cannot help you as I want to, I cannot tell you if it is possible or safe, I cannot ...”

Protect you, Severus finishes inside his mind. Harrison looks like he understands and sighs heavily, rubbing his scar.

“But you have,” he says. “Like, yeah, you’re not a Mage but you taught me about my library, you taught me about Potions, you’ve helped me so much. You taught me to *survive*. You know so fucking much about occlumency. You know more than anyone else. If anyone can help me see if I can do this, it’s you. And I already built the cupboard. In my mind. Maybe it’s always been there but when Voldemort possessed me at the Ministry I could ... I was in there. He couldn’t get in, no matter what he did to my body. I think I could put things in it. Hide them away. And I already have one soul part inside me, right? So I could practise with that.”

Severus believes him. He doesn’t want to, but his mind, his accursed mind is too quick and is already moving through the occlumency that Eileen taught him for the trigger switch inside his mind and how it could be applicable here. He shakes his head against the knowledge but it’s there, the way the Princes have used occlusion for defence for generations. Why else has he been taught this if not to equip his son?

“Even if you could possibly do this, and I put an emphasis on *possibly*,” Severus says slowly. “It is exchanging one problem for another. These additional horcrux parts, will they not cleave to your soul as this other one has done?”

“Harry’s soul has grown around the part of Tom’s soul embedded within him, as soul’s do. It is like a piece of stone a tree has grown around,” Bane says. “Not all horcrux shards will behave the same way. These other pieces, if only held for a short amount of time and protected from the rest of his independent mind, they are less likely to attach.”

“Like stones put in a hole of tree,” Harrison says eagerly. “If I kept the soul bits and then used them to control Tom a bit, to keep his attention on me, he’d be into that, I know he would. He’d like the idea that I had more of his soul than he expected.”

Severus knows his son is right. He imagines the Dark Lord’s face, imagines the excitement in uncovering Harrison possessed even a small fraction of his soul. It fills him with a nasty, creeping dread.

“You intend to use Tom’s obsession with you to his disadvantage,” Bane says. “You think he will focus so much on *you* being the one who has his horcruxes and what he could do with you that he won’t pay attention to the fact someone has access to that which could make him vulnerable.”

“He won’t think I want to destroy them,” Harrison says quietly. “He thinks I’ll turn eventually. He’s sure. And this is what he always wanted, right? Someone with his soul who he could control? It gives me something to bargain with.”

“You will not bargain with yourself,” Severus snaps.

“It’s not with me, it’s with *him*! He just doesn’t know that! Look, I don’t know how wars work but I assume, eventually, even if we gather up all the soul bits, we need a moment when we can just drop a fucking microwave on his head without a bloody Death Eater getting in the way?”

“Excuse me, a *microwave*?” Severus asks blankly but Harrison waves his hand.

“Doesn’t matter, we need, like, a snitch moment! We need to get close enough the the snitch at the right point in the game and this will mean we get to that moment. If he knows what I have, he’ll come to wherever I am.”

“You’re talking about an ambush,” Bane says.

Thank Hades, Severus thinks. An ambush, unlike Quidditch and microwaves, is something he understands.

“Am I?” Harrison frowns. Severus nods. Makes a mental note to led Harrison his copy of *Art of War*. “I just think it’s much easier to get to a moment where someone else gets to shoot a spell at his noseless face if he’s not growling and prowling and trying to kill us all.”

“So you’re not the bargaining chip, you’re the bait. The lure. The distraction.” Bane looks at Severus. “Albus will not like that.”

Severus swallows. *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord ...* As much as he has tried to keep his child away from prophecies he does wonder if it counts as vanquishing if his son is distraction rather than the destruction. In this scenario, the burden of the Dark Lord’s murder will not fall on Harrison’s shoulders. For the first time since Harrison started speaking, Severus feels something akin to relief. Harrison seems to notice because he leans forward eagerly.

“He really won’t think I want to destroy them,” he says earnestly. “I promise. This isn’t a stupid idea.”

If one doesn’t account for the unprecedented amount of mind magic needed to achieve it, Severus could almost agree, but he won’t, not yet.

“That doesn’t account for the part of the Dark Lord’s soul that is ... bonded to your own soul.” Severus finds he cannot use the word that Bane did. Embedded is too awful. “Even if it is only 0.8%.”

“But there’s magic to do that!” Harrison looks relieved, as if the part of this conversation that was most difficult is over and now he can relax. “Right Magnus? The stuff your Dad did?”

Severus rounds upon Bane who hesitates, deep apology in his eyes and Severus knows he will not like what is coming.

“There were ancient charms in the Potter Grimoire that my father worked with that allowed a soul to willingly sever a part of itself.” Bane swallows a mouthful of golden whisky. “The process as it exists in the Potter Grimoire is only for carving. No method of containment used

to create me survives, and a soul part severed and unconfined dies, just as all things do. If he learned to use it, a challenge which is not without it's own complexity, it could work. Harry would simply be ... amputating."

Severus stares at his son. This vivid wording is cruel but necessary, he needs to know what is at stake.

"You'll be maimed," Severus says. "Your soul."

"Yeah, a bit," Harrison shrugs. "But the longer I live, I'll grow it back."

"A soul is not a starfish."

"Not in the stars but in ourselves," Harrison quotes, annoyingly. "Magnus says souls are moulded by lived experience and I'm a mage, I could live as long as he has –,"

"You plan to recover simply through long life?" Severus stares at Bane. "It's obscene."

"Yes," Bane nods. "But it will work."

Severus stares at them, the Mage and the half Mage, and wants to tell them both no. Wants to tell the world to stop spinning for he cannot bear the future if this is what Harrison has to do simply to survive. *If this is parenting, I do not fucking know what I am doing.* So he does something he has not done in a very long time. Severus gestures for Bane's cigarette, not caring that Harrison blusters with utter bafflement when Severus puts it to his lips and takes a long drag.

"What the *fuck*?" Harrison stares at Severus with wide eyes as his eyes move between Severus' mouth and the cigarette.

"Language," Severus closes his eyes and breathes in nicotine and breathes out resolve. He opens his eyes and looks at Bane. There's something in his un-aged face and golden eyes that is expectant, resigned, as if he knows what comes next. "He will live?"

"There are no guarantees as you well know. I do not see the entire length of the road, only shadows of steps we must take but ... this is one of them." Bane's voice is soft, almost apologetic.

There was a time when he would think that making a plan only on the imperfect mystical guidance of Magnus fucking Bane would be delusional. Now it is all he has. Severus takes another drag and thinks of the last time he smoked, a rare cigarette from an elegant gift from the Contessa, shared with Lupin in bed in Venice. *Hades below, Lupin.*

"Before we attempt anything, you must talk to your father." Severus breathes out smoke. "We do not need to tell him about Death and her role in all this. We can couch it purely in terms of your necromancy and occlumency and the plan we have made if you are worried his atheism will not stand it all –,"

"You know it won't," Harrison's smile is fond, suddenly. "At least, not yet."

Severus nods in agreement. Lupin will need to be slowly acclimatised to a new reality, one is spiritual and deified and defies the bounds of the rational world he has set for himself. Severus has no idea now to begin it, but it will not be Harrison's burden.

"That is acceptable, but we do need to tell him what has happened tonight. Where you went. What we have learned."

Harrison groans and puts his head in his hands.

"He's going to be so disappointed," he whispers to his feet.

"He will not, Harrison, he will not," Severus makes his voice as firm as it possibly can be. "I know you are frightened that you are different now but you are not different, not to him, not to me."

"I am a *horcrux*." Harrison's voice is muffled, his knuckles white as he grips his hair.

"You are our child. Nothing changes that."

There is a long moment whilst Harrison thinks and Bane and Severus stare at him, waiting for the moment when Harrison accepts that this is truly happening. That it is possible for him to be this and be loved.

"Okay," Harrison sighs and lifts his head. His eyes are glassy, cheeks wet and for a moment, Severus is struck by the childish shape of his features. He is on the cusp of adulthood but still, in the tremble of his lip and the way he has not quite yet grown into his cheekbones, Severus sees the child his son still is. He feels a deep mourning, almost endless, for how quickly it will be gone. "Call Remus."

The Cupboard under the Stairs

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

TRIGGER WARNING: References to past child abuse.

This time, Remus has opinions and Severus has occlumency.
Next time, Theo turns seventeen.

“He has part of Voldemort’s soul inside him and you didn’t tell me?”

Lupin is glaring at him where they stand in the small overgrown courtyard of Ludlow castle. Lupin had listened, tautly, to Bane’s gentle explanation, hugged his son, reassured him softly that he was not angry and loved him just the same and then dragged Severus out into the courtyard. They have gone through everything multiple times; Harrison’s near suicide attempt, which made Lupin sway and nearly weep, Albus’ betrayal, which made Lupin rage. Then Harrison’s revelation, Harrison’s ideas, which have incensed Lupin and prompted a spiral of academic questions that Severus has barely had the mind to field, and now they are at the point Severus always expected to be.

“I didn’t know until this evening.”

Lupin glares at Severus and he knows, fairly, that he is in trouble. He doesn’t begrudge this reaction; he would feel precisely the same way if Lupin had been the one to find Harrison tonight.

“And you didn’t tell me *immediately?*” Lupin says. “It’s part of Voldemort’s *soul!*”

“It is less than 0.8%”

“Excuse me?”

Severus drags on his second cigarette of the night. He hasn’t smoked this much since Regulus died.

“If creating a horcrux splits the soul in two over and over again, each time taking 50% and leaving 50% in the body, logically the piece inside Harrison is less than 0.8% soul.” Severus puffs out smoke. “And the Dark Lord is, himself, imbued with barely any soul at all.”

Which explains why he's such a motherfucking son of a bitch, Severus thinks.

"That's what you're hanging that on?" Lupin looks baffled and furious. "In *two*, Severus, not necessarily in *half*!"

"The language in all of the literature we have read refers to *in twain* –, "

"In twain does not specify fifty percent!"

"When Solomon threatens to cut the child in twain he does not refer to the removal of a toenail –, "

"And you think there is a comparison between ancient Hebrew texts and the lore of horcruxes? The origin of the word twain is from the Old English *twēgen*, meaning *two* –, "

"And it hardly suggests two unequal parts, does it? When one divides by two one divides *in half*, does one not?"

"Don't fucking distract me!"

"I'm not the one diverging to Old English –, "

"In whatever language, 0.8% is still too much!" Lupin's hands are shaking. "And 0.8% is only the beginning, the plan is to add more?"

"It is not a plan, just a notion of how to utilise the horcruxes towards the Dark Lord's downfall whilst keeping Harrison alive which, let us be blunt, is the fucking challenge of the shitting century!" Severus inhales sharply, barely believing he is saying this out loud. "The Dark Lord loves nothing but his possessiveness, his jealousy, it knows no bounds. When it is finally revealed to him that Harrison has kept his horcruxes he will be ... distracted."

"Distracted? Distracted is the fucking least of it, he will be *obsessed!*" Lupin's eyes are incredibly orange. "You're planning a fucking ambush and you want to use our son as a *distraction* to bring down a maniac?"

"I do not *want* any of this! I do not want the Dark Lord to be obsessed with our child but he *IS!*" Severus finds himself shouting. "I am merely trying to *listen* to our child and elucidate his needs, since it is his soul in question!"

"Harry is a fucking child!" Lupin bellows back. "A child who tried to *kill* himself not three hours ago! We are his parents! We are meant to PROTECT HIM!"

Lupin kicks over a stone sun dial, in an absurd display of werewolf strength. Severus watches, impassively, as Lupin pummels it into pieces. Once, it would have terrified him. Now he's just impressed that Remus isn't pulling the entire castle down. When Lupin is gasping and trembling, hands bloody, Severus puts his cigarette between his teeth and gives Lupin a firm shove backwards onto an ivy covered bench against the wall.

"Smoke," Severus commands, placing the cigarette on Lupin's lip. He jerks his wrecked hands towards him and whips out his wand, beginning to heal them. "You cannot see

Harrison looking like you've wrestled a stone giant."

Lupin does not seem able to speak yet, growing softly under his breath and smoke furling out of his nose. Severus takes his pulse. It is foolishly high.

"You know, that sun dial has probably stood in the Black castle since the twelfth century," he says conversationally. "Until you came along."

"That sun dial is clearly from the 19th Century. I would hardly destroy a relic," Lupin snorts and Severus tries not to smirk.

"So no architecture after 1800 is safe?"

"Sev."

There is a hand in his hair, a firm thumb and finger lifting his chin. Those eyes are golden in the darkness, luminescent and heart stopping. Severus sees in them an invitation, a steady consent for him to dive inside his lover's mind and he does, the gentleness and ease of it never ceasing to amaze him.

He sees a flash of Lupin, younger and healthier, standing in a nursery that Severus recognises painfully from the night of Lily's death. Lupin's hair is longer and Severus has forgotten what Lupin used to look like, thicker in the shoulders and softer in the waist, a curved behind in jeans. It reminds him hideously of how lycanthropy is ravaging his lover's body, tender plumpness becoming taut with illness and scars. Young Lupin is cradling Harrison to his chest, who cannot be more than three months old. Already, his green eyes are fixed on Lupin's face, amazed.

"... So that's what it means to be a werewolf," young Lupin whispers, swaying from side to side. "But what it means for you is only one thing, Harry. I'm your wolf, okay? I'll always protect you, no matter what happens to you. Wolves take care of their cubs, look after the pack. I'm never going to have another cub, Harry. It's only going to be you, and your brother and sisters, when you have them. Sirius and I, well, we can't give you a cousin and I doubt ... well, we won't adopt. I don't even know what will happen to us anymore."

Young Lupin seems to have forgotten that he's talking to an infant whose eyes are slowly drooping. He's staring out of the window, eyes glazed.

"Besides, even if the world wasn't a shitshow and my relationship wasn't ... well, fucking terrifying me, it wouldn't be right to adopt a child with someone who wasn't my truest mate and he ... First loves, cub. They never leave you." Lupin's voice drops to next to nothing but there is a frustrated, fond expression on his face that makes Severus' heart clench. "Severus ... he's complicated. The sharpest mind. Annoyingly beautiful, still. Despite everything."

He touches Harrison's beautiful plump cheeks, his sleeping eyelids.

"I've got to go away for a bit, far away. I won't be back for a while, but you'll be safe here and Mummy and Daddy will show you my picture every day." Behind him, on the chest of drawers, Severus can see a photo of Remus with Black and Potter and Lily. Once, he would

have looked at their faces with derision. Now, he can only see how fucking young they all were. He watches young Lupin kiss Harrison's unblemished forehead as he lowers him softly into the crib. "I love you, little cub. I'll always protect you. I promise."

When Severus withdraws from Lupin's mind, he sees his lover's eyes are wet.

"You have not failed him. Whatever we decide, we will protect him to the absolute best of our abilities." Severus reaches up to smooth Lupin's face, thumbs finding the familiar planes of his bone structure, just as he used to do to calm the wolf. "But we have to find a way to protect him from what is inside him and we have to listen to him. He needs bodily autonomy now more than ever."

"I know that, I want to give him that, of course I do but .. these choices are abominable. To choose between something that could maim his soul permanently and running and ... and watching Voldemort torture you to death through your mark," Lupin shudders, tears wetting Severus' hands. "Just abominable."

"They are." Severus nods. "But perhaps in one there is a way he can survive."

"With a maimed soul."

"Does anyone come out of war with a whole one?"

Lupin groans, dropping his forehead down onto Severus' shoulder.

"Merlin," he mutters. "I'm going to need another cigarette."

"Yes." He watches Lupin's face as he pulls back, hears the voice of the twenty one year old wolf inside his mind. *He's complicated. The sharpest mind. Annoyingly beautiful, still.*

"Remus."

"Yes?"

Severus swallows and gently takes the cigarette from out of his lips. There is so much he wants to say. *Thank you for coming back to me. If first loves never leave you, thank you for staying.*

"I would have said the same. About you, then. Despite everything."

For a second, Lupin is puzzled, then when realisation dawns his expression is fond and frustrated, baffled and beautiful.

"Honestly, Severus." He kisses Severus, tasting of smoke. "Let's go and find our son."

"There are so many holes in this plan it is basically Swiss cheese." Lupin is sitting beside Harrison on the embroidered bench that looks as if it has sat in the Black castle since the

1200's. He has one arm around his son and one hand gripping the glass Bane pressed into his hand as soon as he sat down. Harrison has been doing some nail painting with Bane whilst Lupin and Severus has been outside and now he is picking nervously at a dark green polish. "It is the most convoluted and complex of schemes. I can barely keep track of it."

That's because you don't know it was recommended personally by Death, Severus thinks and takes a gulp of whisky.

"How is it more complicated than Dumbledore getting me to kill horcruxes and then killing me?" Harrison frowns.

"Don't," Lupin's face is taut.

"I'm just saying, as far as complicated plans go, aren't we in good company?"

"I don't think having a plan akin to Albus' is a good thing. His priority is to defeat Voldemort, ours is that you live," Lupin sips his whisky. "Has anyone yet considered that the core of this plan relies upon Harry breaking his promise to the Goblin King? He swore he would not use necromancy to end a life and he would be using it, over and over, to destroy horcruxes."

"Are horcruxes living?" Severus asks, because he does truly does not know.

"What is living?" Bane asks philosophically, blowing smoke out of his mouth.

"I think if His Majesty decides that the death of an obscurus breaks the Fell Accords he will feel the same way about parts of Lord Voldemort," Lupin says.

"Anyone who thinks the Dark Lord will be defeated by conventional magic is surely deluded," Severus says.

"It doesn't matter if he's deluded or not, if we do this, Harry will be thrown out of the country and stripped of his house, not to mention being thrown on the mercy of Lucius Malfoy –,"

"Although if Tom Riddle is dead, necromancy or not, Lucius Malfoy will be a threat neutralised," Bane says. *Or he will be dead*, Severus thinks. He finds he cannot conjure an ounce of sadness for the man Lucius has become now. For the young man he was when Severus first met him, he feels a twinge.

"That doesn't change the Goblin King's position," Lupin turns to Harrison. "He will strip you of your houses. He will cast you from this country and you will be banished until your last breath."

"*Tad*, if we don't do something about Tom, you and Severus are going to hide me somewhere until I die anyway, that's not going to be a barrel of laughs," Harrison's voice is weary. "Besides, he can strip me of my houses all he wants, it's not like I *want* to sit in the fucking Wizengamot. I'm shit at politics and everyone knows it."

"They take the rings," Lupin touches Harrison's hands. "Like Voldemort did."

Harrison swallows hard and looks down at his fingers, the black ring glowing softly. Suddenly, there is a pop and Kreacher appears with a plate of mini treacle tarts and a scowl.

“The Black magic will never leave Master, Master must stop being a melancholy wolf!” Kreacher shoves the mini tart into Harrison’s hand and slaps him around the head. White light pulses around his hand.

“Ow!” Harrison glares at his elf. “I fucking wish the Goblin King would nick you!”

“Language,” Severus says.

“Excuse me, a melancholy *wolf*?” Lupin demands, looking comically put out, but dipping a treacle tart in his whisky anyway. It seems nothing on earth will get between Lupin and sugar, not even revelations of cosmic proportions. Severus finds it both baffling and endearing.

“Master will never be rid of Kreacher!” Kreacher gives Harrison an uncharacteristically stern look. “Master is bound.”

“Yeah, I am.” Harrison smiles with surprising lightness and light dances from each of his rings; bright white from the Black diamond, grey shadows from the Prince ring, green light and silver flecks from the Peverell/Slytherin ring. “Magic doesn’t just go, Moony, no matter what the goblins say. It has to want to go. They’ll all make their choices when the time comes.”

It’s such an astonishing thing to say, so unreasonable and casual that Severus and Lupin stare at one another, joined in their disbelief that their child, a young man who currently has access to more heirship magic than anyone else in the country, would let it all go on the basis of what the *magic* wanted. Bane breaks their silence by chuckling softly.

“The sun indeed, Harry,” Bane toasts him. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“Just fine carrying around bits of Voldemort’s soul inside his mind until he uses necromancy to kill them?” Lupin says. “And then using methods untested since the 1500’s to sever the horcrux inside of him from his own soul?”

“Well, it’s better than me just like, I dunno, trotting out of Hogwarts and letting Tom straight up Avada Kedavra me in the forest to get rid of it,” Harrison shoves his treacle tart into his mouth whole. “Isn’t it?”

Lupin crushes the glass in his hand with a growl.

“That,” Severus says slowly, glaring at his son. “Is an incredibly low bar to set.”

Harrison rolls his eyes, mouth too full to answer.

“Master is an idiot,” Kreacher mutters, slapping a second tart into Harrison’s hand and conjuring a second glass. Harrison holds it as Severus waves his wand, cleaning Lupin’s glassy hands. Bane refills it and Harrison quickly dips his own treacle tart in it. Severus glares at him until he guiltily passes it to his father with a heavy swallow.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Harrison turns to gently look Lupin in the eye. “But look, it’s like Severus said last term, freezing and running and inspiring fear are all good options but if we can fight and win, that’s definitely better.”

“What is this?” Lupin looks at Severus.

“We discussed how to manage trauma,” Severus looks at his son, so proud that he’s internalised this message. “The fight or flight response.”

“Yeah and now it has to be time to fight, right?” Harrison looks earnestly between them. “Besides, we have to do something with the soul bit inside of me. We can’t just, like, leave it there, hanging out –,”

“We will use the process from the Potter Grimoire to free you and then we will leave Albus’ plans to Albus. Let him hunt horcruxes, let him bring down Voldemort and we will wait it out. I understand the value of the fight and flight comparison but I will not let you join a fight that asks so much of you.” Lupin is staring firmly down into his liquor. “We have given enough, we have struggled enough, it is *enough*.”

Severus thinks Lupin is hanging by a thread. He feels very much the same. *Must it always be us, our family, our sacrifices?*

“It asks so much of me either way, *Tad*.” Harrison’s voice is plaintive as he squeezes his father’s hand. “If we run away from all of this, I’ll be pulled apart from Theo, from Hermione and Severus will *die*. Tom will know he’s a traitor and he’ll torture him to death.”

Severus sees Lupin’s eyes flutter closed with despair. It is too much to ask Lupin to explain this to Harrison, why he would choose his child over his lover every time.

“I have already declared my preference in this matter,” Severus says. “We will do what we need to do in order to protect you.”

“You can’t just decide that!” Harrison explodes. “The cost is too fucking high!”

“Language. And yes, I can.”

When Lupin opens his eyes the despair is still there but so is a deep, violent understanding: *we will both die in the worst manners we can imagine rather than watch our son die.*

“Your parents love you, Harry,” Bane says. “You cannot fault them for it.”

“I’m not but ... but we have to test it, at least, right?” Harrison looks at them both desperately. “Yeah, I might not be an heir or a Lord at the end of it but who gives a damn where we live if we’re together and alive? If you get to teach me to make curry and carve pumpkins, if you get to be my parents and be in love or whatever you call this –,” Harrison waves a hand between his parents and Severus’ back stiffens. “What does it matter? So we might not live here but who fucking cares?”

“Language,” Severus says, but it’s more of a reaction than a real rebuke, he and Lupin are both too entranced by Harrison’s words. Severus’ mouth is dry with the fear inside him that

his child is speaking his deepest, most secret hope into reality. Conjuring it for them, for all of them, the family he does not dare put words to. Lupin too, looks stunned and flushed and furtive. They have never even discussed the notion that if they survive, they would continue to exist and parent together but here their child is, casually putting a phrase to it: *be in love, or whatever you call this*. Bane is watching Harrison with a look on his face that can only be described as fond pride and Harrison, looking both embarrassed and emboldened, goes on.

"If there's a chance that we all get out alive and get to keep being a unit, isn't it worth just testing?" Harrison turns between Lupin, who is holding his hand too tight and Severus, who is holding his whisky too tight. "Can't we just see if I can put the soul bit in my occlumency box?"

Severus gives Lupin a long, steady look. *Am I enough?* Severus wonders. Is Severus enough of a draw, enough to take a risk on for the young man who held Harrison when he was a newborn and dedicated himself to protecting this child? Is the smallest hope, the smallest chance of raising a child with someone as insufficient as Severus enough for this frustrating, melancholy, magnificent wolf? He feels the need to make some move, to let his child and Lupin know he is willing. That there is nothing he would not do for the opportunity to have them both, his son and his wolf, to watch them survive and live and flourish beyond all of this.

"I am amenable," Severus says. "To trying."

"There seems little harm in testing the occlumency," Bane says softly. "If for no other reason than I would not recommend Harry severs his horcrux immediately."

"Why not?" Severus and Lupin ask together, which proves to Severus that even if they go along with Harrison's idea to undermine Albus with their own horcrux hunt, they both want the horcrux out of their son as soon as possible.

"Because whilst Tom Riddle lives, so does Harry. He is Tom Riddle's horcrux but it also means that, in all likelihood, Harry cannot be killed unless attempted in the manner to kill a horcrux."

This is what Death has told them, but whether it will pass muster with Doctor Remus Lupin, one of the most academic minds Severus knows, is another thing entirely. He can practically feel his son's taut energy, unsure whether his father will believe this just on the basis of Magnus Bane's recommendation.

"That makes sense, the garden, the phoenix tears, Grimmauld Place, the Dido's lament. Yes, yes all right." Lupin presses a shaking hand to his forehead. "We can test the occlumency. I'm not ... I'm not saying yes to the entire plan, to hunting and holding the horcruxes, I still think the necromancy is too much of a risk –,"

"But yes to occlumency?" Harrison prompts. Lupin looks up into Severus' face, carved with lines of worry and stress but also, Severus thinks, a little bit of need. Perhaps for same future that Severus so desperately craves.

"Yes to occlumency. If nothing else, we can at least try this."

"Thank you," Harrison sounds relieved and looks at Severus, who surprises himself with the amount of relief he feels too.

"But whatever happens, Harry is leaving Hogwarts," Lupin goes on. "I'm not waiting until the end of term."

"But Dumbledore –,"

"Wants to have access to you. We can control that better outside of Hogwarts."

"We can't leave, he threatened Severus –,"

"As he does nearly daily," Severus rolls his eyes. "We can remove you from school and navigate Albus, just as we did in the summer."

"Exactly, we'll say you understandably need time to process this information, that you need time away from Hogwarts for your mental wellbeing –,"

"You're going to *fake* that I'm full of edges?"

"It is *not* faking," Lupin's voice is terribly, painfully curt. "You've gone through something awful and you will not stay there. We'll keep the lines of communication open with Albus just like he wants as that will benefit us if we decide to pursue horcruxes, but I will not have you living there. You will come to Venice."

"Or here, if Albus stipulates you should stay in the country," Bane shrugs.

"Tonight?" Harrison asks.

"I will not send you back to Hogwarts." Lupin looks up at Severus, desperation in his face. "Not under Albus' watch. Not after tonight."

Severus knows he has to agree. Of course he does, but still, it is a seeping wound in his chest. He's known this moment is coming, he's known for months but now it is on top of him, the time when he and Lupin must decide to remove their child for his safety, it's much more painful than he imagined. Still, he makes himself nod.

"Not tonight," Harrison blurts out. "Please, it's Theo's birthday tomorrow."

"Harry, this is not a debate."

"I'm not debating, we've been thinking me and Hermione wouldn't come back after Christmas anyway, but please, just let me have Theo's birthday. We've planned something, it's his seventeenth, it's important." Harrison looks pleadingly at Severus. "Please. One more day."

Severus hesitates but the temptation to keep his son close, just for one more day, is too powerful.

"One more day," he says. Lupin catches his eye and Severus tries not to plead with his glances. "It will give us time to prepare, at least."

Lupin nods and Severus is full of gratitude. Every hour will be precious.

"But first, let us test the occlumency. One step at a time," Severus sets his drink down and stands up. He looks at Bane. "Is there a room we can use?"

"Next door," Bane says. Severus nods and looks at Lupin.

"Will you come?"

"Do you need me?"

"It is a complicated process, it ... " Severus hesitates. He doesn't like to put into words how he is insufficient for his child. He remembers the discussion they had over the summer about Harrison's meagre family bonds in the House of Black. *Only three. Remus and Granger and Ronald.* "It is usually beneficial to have a trusted family member with complimentary magic to assist. Someone Harrison has a family bond with would be the optimum choice."

"Yeah, so why would we need more than you?" Harrison frowns.

Severus feels like someone has hit him in the stomach. Harrison is looking confused, perhaps too tired and overwhelmed by everything to realise the stunner of a revelation he has shot at Severus' head. Severus turns to Bane, who is smiling softly.

"Three family bonds. Remus, Hermione and ..." He points the finger at Severus.

"Was it ever established when ...?" Severus coughs slightly, trying not to blush as he stammers. Harrison, thankfully, looks blissfully unaware of his embarrassment.

"The summer. Makes sense, right? Family bonds, two parents, one sister, blah blah blah, is ..." He shoots Severus a sharp, nervous look. "Okay?"

Severus is startled by it, amazed that his son could possibly imagine a world when it would not be something Severus would celebrate, but then he remembers Harrison's nervous question after the Hogsmeade visit, asking Severus if Lily was still his most precious person. *He worries I will not want him.* Catching his son's eye, incredibly gently, Severus uses legilimency and his skills to guide a memory to the front of Harrison's mind. The two of them standing in Grimmauld Place before Harrison healed Arthur. *I wish I had raised you.* Harrison coughs and blushes deeply and looks away.

"Can we do some occlumency shit, then?"

"Language," Severus opens the door, trying to ignore the way Lupin is grinning at him so fondly and Bane looks so maniacally pleased with himself. He and Harrison step into an anteroom that is lined on every side with books.

"A library," Harrison says. "Apt."

“Yes.” Severus points his wand at the fire to light it and then hesitates, before staring down at his Prince ring and drawing shadows into being. He sends them to the door, to the windows, every crack and crevice in the walls and up the fire place. He’s surprised by how easy it is, after using the Prince magic to defend Harrison in the tower. Harrison watches him with interest.

“Guard the secrets?”

Severus nods and moves to sit on the floor by the fireplace. Harrison looks at him like he’s grown an extra head.

“I’ve literally never seen you sit on the floor.”

“I have sat beside you in multiple uncomfortable situations, including many, many floors.”

“Yeah, but like, not *willingly*.”

“Sit,” Severus commands and Harrison does. For a second, Severus sees himself in Harrison’s place, cross legged and curious, in front of Eileen. He was much younger, of course, but her words fill his mouth. “This type of occlumency, burying a truth this deep, it requires a level of guidance we have not explored previously.”

Severus hesitates, sees the stiffening in Harrison’s shoulders. “You are nervous.”

The child shifts uncomfortably and shrugs.

“What can I do to alleviate your apprehension?”

“It ... helps when we’re just us,” Harrison swallows and blushes as if such words are shameful and not filling Severus with an utter sense of wonder that this child who once could not sit alone in his presence without a shield between them now requests it as something that will comfort him. “What if it was like it was earlier? When we were fully in the shadows and it was ... quiet and safe, like the nothing place?”

“I am not entirely sure how you achieved that.”

“I think I just ...” Harrison reaches his right hand to Severus’, still holding his wand, and where their rings meet, darkness spills out of them, encasing them in a cave of shadows. Severus lets out a long slow breath. The child is right. Severus has never found the centre of the Prince magic anything but oppressive, he remembers the moment he found Eileen dead, how it felt as if he were the centre of the dark heart of the earth and his screams were echoing into dimensions he didn’t understand, but now, with Harrison, he too feels comforted. He too feels safe. An distant reflection of the safety he felt with Eileen when she was alive. “What happens next?”

“I need to see your mindscape, we need to be there together.”

“Okay.” Harrison takes hold of his other hand so they are crossed, right hand holding right, Severus’ wand cramped in between them and their rings pressed together and Severus’

ringless left hand holding his son's mutilated left hand gently. He imagines that they look as if they are in the middle of an unusual ritual which, Severus supposes, they are. "I'm ready."

Severus is not so sure, but the possibility of the world Harrison created with his words, where Harrison and Lupin both survive, is too tantalising not to strive for.

"Legilimens."

Inside Harrison's mind is a frozen lake. Unlike Severus' mindscape, which features heavy snow, Harrison's is the kind of cold where the ground is icy, hard as granite, the trees are stiff with ice too. Perhaps because it is the first time Severus has cast this charm upon Harrison without any resistance, there is a sense of themselves taking physical form beside one another at the edge of the lake.

"This is not your library."

"This is where I make things cold," Harrison says. "The library is where I hide things."

"Show me."

The library rises around them, building on top of the lake, a mimicry of the Hogwarts library with shelves made of shadows. Harrison looks down at their feet and a trap door appears, lifting to reveal the dark, churning water below.

"This is where I drown my books," Harrison says. "When it's really bad, like with Tom or with Dumbledore, I collapse the library completely and pull a mountain down on it and freeze it over completely."

"Show me."

Harrison does. Around them, walls tumble into water, ice rises, a mountain falls, frozen stone rumbling and crashing into ice, screeching and keening and suddenly it is cold, much too cold, like the worst headache reaching into Severus' mind, so freezing he must withdraw. Suddenly he is staring at his son in the midst of the Prince shadows in the Black castle. Harrison is breathing deeply, his breath chilled on the air, and his hands are very cold. Severus quickly checks his vitals through the monitoring bracelet, but Harrison's pulse is adequate. Severus gives him a short, approving smile.

"Very effective," he says. "You forced me from your mind or rather, made it impossible for the charm to flourish."

"Yeah, it worked with Dumbledore too," Harrison shakes his head derisively. "Still hurt like a bitch though."

Severus is gratified that he does not seem unwell this time.

"Occlumency is not without it's physical consequences," he says. "There is a score upon the body."

"Yeah. I get cold." Harrison shivers lightly. "I don't know what the cupboard does."

Severus' stomach churns at the word. He remembers the cupboard under the stairs in Harrison's various terrible memories.

"Show me the cupboard."

"I don't ... I don't know how to get there."

Harrison looks shamefaced and Severus' heart clenches, remembering all the times his child has felt humiliated in the past due to his attention deficit disorder.

"Tell me how it happened," Severus says softly. "In your own words."

Harrison looks relieved.

"Tom possessed me and I was in so much pain ... it was everywhere, like he had complete control of my body and I just ... I shut myself away in there to be safe."

"I see." Severus knows what he must do but he is reluctant. After all, every time he has revisited one of his child's most painful memories with occlumency his body has recreated the physical toll. *It must be done. We must at least attempt it.* "Harrison, I am going to search your library for the exact memory. We are going to recreate it, until we find the cupboard."

"Okay."

Severus realises it's a measure of Harrison's trust in him that he simply nods expectantly.

"There may be pain."

"I know."

"Even inside your mind, the charm on your bracelet will alert me if the process becomes dangerous and we will stop immediately."

Harrison takes a deep breath.

"I'm ready."

Severus holds his wand just as he was before. He is comforted by the fact his son hasn't stopped holding either of his hands.

"Legilimens."

It doesn't take much for Severus to find the memory, Harrison has left it ready for him inside the library, the book open and the moment already flowering into a memory. The inside of his son's mind becomes chaos, flashes of childhood memories and the Dark Lord's voice. Severus realises this is what Harrison must have experienced whilst being possessed and lets it play out, watching a smug, blonde child slamming the elbow of a slight, dark boy in the car door. Hears the Dark Lord's voice echoing nastily: *Look at what you are capable of, little weapon. I shall take every moment of pain and turn it into fury.* There are more memories of the litany of abuse, things Severus has never seen before because no doubt, Harrison never

thought to mention them. Dursley casually pushing the small boy down the stairs, Severus wincing when he sees the tiny head crash against the bannister. It's relentless, it's cruel, it's the Dark Lord pulling every moment of pain from his son, sometimes the boy is tiny and completely helpless, sometimes he is forcing a blade into the roof of the mouth of a motherfucking basilisk, sometimes his hands are blistering Quirrell's face, sometimes he is a mulish, angry teenager and still ducking Petunia's swipes with the frying pan, still not moving fast enough, wincing with the pain but too old to know how much tears and screams are worth.

You've always been broken, Harry, and now you are mine. It's a galling, sharp, vicious thing that cuts to the heart of Severus to hear the Dark Lord say. Then suddenly, the memories stop. A humming tune fills the air that Severus can't immediately catch but is very familiar. Then, as if the music has conjured it, there is a small door under the stairs and it is opened. In the next fluid moment, Severus is inside it, looking at his son who is using crayons to colour on paper. Severus can feel the edges of the reality around him fading, as if Harrison wants to pull away. Severus knows they mustn't.

"Stay here, *farzandam*."

The boy sighs and suddenly, slowly begins to change, like a flickering image on a television screen. He is now possibly around eleven years old. Severus watches in amazement as he changes again. Smaller again, so tiny, hair still wildly curly and skin still like Severus', and Severus tries not to gasp when he sees the dark bruise blooming over his infant son's eye and his lip splitting.

"It hurts to stay here."

The child's voice is so young. Severus' heart clenches and he can't stop staring at his child as he never knew him; so thin, so fragile, so tiny that Severus finds himself wishing he could embrace him.

"I know," he whispers. "Harrison, are you yourself inside your mind here? As a young man?"

Harrison takes a shaking breath, looks at his small hands holding crayons as if surprised to find them there.

"Sort of? I think I'm a bit of both." Without meaning to, he starts to hum. Severus recognises it.

"One, two, three, four five, once I caught a fish alive," Severus sings very softly to him. He remembers Lily singing it when she was a child. A muggle nursery rhyme. Perhaps Harrison learned it from Petunia, perhaps she sung it to her own son and without meaning to, gave the nephew she hated something to self-soothe with. Harrison's worried little lip smiles tentatively. "You like to sing that song here?"

"Uh huh. *Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, then I let it go again,*" Harrison sniffs. The sound of his humming becomes magnified, echoing all around them inside the cupboard. The nursery rhyme used to keep demons away. "Helps. Drowns them out."

“I see that.” Severus looks to the small cupboard door. If he focuses, he fancies that he can hear stomping footsteps outside, drawing closer and pulling away. He thinks he can also hear the voice of the Dark Lord outside. It is possible that this place is truly so deep inside Harrison’s mind, even the Dark Lord cannot access it. *Certainly a safe space to store things.* “Can you draw me the part of you that was once the Dark Lord’s?”

“His soul bit?”

“Yes. Do you know what it looks like inside of you?”

“Uh huh.” Harrison picks up a green crayon. He draws it, again and again. It takes Severus a moment to realise what is is. *Green light. The Avada Kedavra curse.* For a second, Severus is full of despair because of course it is this. Somewhere in his mind, his own child remembers the moment the Dark Lord did this. The moment the Dark Lord turned him into a horcrux.

“Very good, *farzandam*, ” Severus swallows his pain. “Does it look like anything else?”

“No, but it sounds like something.”

“What does it sound like?”

The tiny Harrison tilts his head thoughtfully. Suddenly, a whistling sound fills the cupboard, blended with a screech and the echo of distant, high pitched laughter that can only be the Dark Lord. There is the smell of fire, but also of oil and sewage, a combination that Severus knows and recognises from one of the worst nights of his life. This is the smell of a house blown to pieces. This is the smell of Godric’s Hollow after the Dark Lord’s downfall. It is a tiny moment of insight into how Harrison experiences magic and Severus wonders how he stands such a sensory overload.

“Draw this too,” Severus manages to say. “Show me the smell and the sound too.”

Harrison doesn’t seem to have to think. He draws green teeth, over and over, drawn in a vicious smile. As he does, the sound dulls and vanishes, the smell dissipates, as if it is being pulled into the coloured wax on the paper, and Severus knows that they are getting close to what they need. *Nearly there.*

“Very good.” Severus looks at the door. “We’re going to leave the cupboard now.”

“Can’t,” Harrison shakes his head and keeps drawing. “Monsters out there.”

“Harrison—,” Severus begins, trying to keep his tone soothing, but the child is shaking his head, shrinking inside giant clothing, hair wayward, arms bruised, face swelling from a brutal beating. It takes Severus’ breath away.

“Not Harry, not anyone, freak, disgusting, filthy boy, worthless,” Harrison chants, scratching the crayon into the paper, starting to sing. “*One, two, three, four, five ...*”

“*Once I caught a fish alive,*” Severus joins in, singing softly, noticing how his child’s tiny shoulders relax when he does. “*Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, then I let it go again.*”

Harrison lets out a long sigh.

“*Farzandam*,” Severus gently tips his fingers under his chin, looking into those bright, wide, eyes in a face sunken from not enough care. “How old are you?”

“Five,” the child whispers. Severus’ heart clenches. Five was when Harrison was first almost killed by his so-called guardians, left outside in winter to freeze to death and only saved by magic. Five is when Harrison first began to think of his cupboard as safety, perhaps first really understood the danger Petunia and her husband really represented. This was when the cupboard inside his mind was built.

“Five,” Severus repeats the word. “Would you like some help with your monsters?”

Harrison shakes his little head.

“Too big, too scary. Can’t do anything. Sit still, stay quiet, no one knows, safe here.”

The child is shaking all over, Severus wonders if he is so lost in his memories that he no longer has a sense of his older self, perhaps does not even know who Severus is anymore.

“Do you know who I am, Harrison?”

“Shadowman,” Harrison mumbles. Severus tries not to smile at the ridiculous nickname Lupin and Harrison use.

“That is correct,” Severus nods. “I am full of shadows that eat monsters. We can go outside now and we will leave this monster –,” Severus taps a finger against the pictures of green light and sound. “Behind us. It will never come out. Not unless we open the door.”

“Don’t want to open the door.”

“Then we will lock it tight and keep the key secret.” Severus tentatively strokes his tiny son’s head and tries to fight the longing that rises inside of him to draw him into his arms and rock him. But would the teenage Harrison allow that? Would the part of his son that is so guarded and afraid see that as a violation of the tentative agreement of touch and trust between them? “Does that sound good, *farzandam*?”

“Uh huh.”

“Can you open the door for me?”

Harrison stares at the door that has no handle and suddenly, it does. Severus opens it and ducks out into the shadows, bending down to hold out a hand to the child. How small he looks, how tiny inside the cupboard. Even though it is inside Harrison’s mind, he rages against Petunia who could look at this infant, glassy eyed and bruised, and close the door on him. The child clutches the picture of his shadowman close to his chest as he takes the offered hand.

“Never done this,” Harrison mutters.

“Done what, *farzandam*?”

Little Harrison looks at their held hands. Severus feels the stinging burn of weeping rising inside of him. A five year old child who has never felt the steady, careful attention of holding an adult’s hand when crossing the road, or falling in the park. *It is not real*, Severus tells himself firmly. *This is memory, not an encounter with my infant child*. It does not stop Severus from squeezing the child’s hand gently as he guides Harrison out of the cupboard and immediately, Harrison is sixteen again. The drawings are gone. He is looking down at the cupboard, which is now filled the pictures of the horcrux. They watch as the small space pulses with lime green light and a whistling sound. Severus feels a thrill of victory. They have nearly done it. They are so close.

“What is in the cupboard?” Severus asks quietly.

“The horcrux.”

“Close the door.”

Harrison must do these things, it his mind. Harrison does and instantly, the sound of the screech is stifled. *It’s working*. Severus knows it is not yet complete.

“Lock it,” he says. Harrison does, sliding the many bolts across, just like Petunia must have done. There’s a padlock, suddenly, and a key in his hand. Harrison locks it, a satisfyingly loud click. Nothing can be heard. There is no light under the door. *It is working*.

“Where does this go?”

“We drown it.”

Severus thinks of where they need to be, using the legilimency charm to guide them back to Harrison’s library. Severus points to the trap door. Harrison drops the key into the water and watches it sink. Then, abruptly, Severus ends the charm. He is staring at his son, his real, teenage son with the scars on his face and a guarded, weary expression. Severus is relieved he is not bearing his childhood bruises. Harrison lets go of Severus’ hand for a moment and rubs his face.

“I can’t believe we did it,” he mutters.

“How do you feel?” Severus asks.

“It’s strange,” Harrison’s eyes are bleak for a second. “I ... I can’t remember Mum as well.”

Severus’ breath catches in his chest.

“Can you explain?”

“I don’t know, I guess it’s just like when I think of her, I don’t think of that night anymore,” Harrison frowns. “I think of my photos and what you told me and I guess the feelings I have that she loved me? But I don’t I can’t remember her voice as clearly.”

Severus wishes that he had a reasonable, provable theory to apply here. But instead, all he can do is use his instincts.

“It is possible, I suppose, that because the horcrux was fused to your soul at that moment, on that night, that it carries those memories.” Severus swallows. “It is possible that by shutting it away in your deepest memories we have, essentially, removed them from your consciousness.”

“How would I unlock it?” Harrison asks. “I mean, if we wanted to put other soul bits in there too?”

“Your song,” Severus says softly. “That is how you navigate to it. Now. I’m going to try and find the cupboard and open it.”

“What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to force me out, Harrison.”

For a second, Harrison gives him a flash of a smile that is so full of power and intent that Severus feels a thrill of pride.

“My pleasure.”

Severus moves fast. He cannot be gentle now, he must be his worst because he must know if it works. He swoops through memories even as Harrison tumbles his library, even as he brings a mountain down upon it, Severus digs ruthlessly and effectively, knowing what he searches for. He finds the cupboard door even as the water rises around him. He points his wand at it, he casts every unlocking spell he knows but the cupboard is sinking. The water is freezing, the ice is climbing into Severus’ brain and he is sinking too, he is freezing too, and he cannot breathe or cast or think so he must get out –

He gasps and opens his eyes. He stares at his son. Harrison’s lips are blue but his eyes are bright and sharp, glowing in the shadowed darkness. Severus checks his vitals immediately. Harrison only smiles wryly.

“You did excellently,” Severus says.

“Yeah.” Harrison’s voice is calm, determined. Severus knows what is coming next. “It worked.”

“It did.”

“I want to do this.” His son’s eyes are green, so green, and glow with an unearthly shine. “I can do this. I can put the other soul bits in the cupboard.”

“You can.”

“I want you to let me do this.” Harrison squeezes his hands. Severus looks down at the Prince rings, sees how the shadows that furl out from them join and mingle, as if they were always supposed to be together. “Will you tell Remus I can do this? I know I can do this, I know we

can do this. Magnus can teach me the spell from the Potter Grimoire, when we've got them all we'll be ready for Tom. We can do this, I can keep the horcrux parts, I can lure him, I can sever my horcrux part last and then you can kill him, we can *do this*. We don't need Dumbledore and his plans, this is *our* plan and I know we can do this. Will you help me? Please."

Severus doesn't have to think about it, just like the moment Albus asked him what he would give for Lily, if he would spy to save her. Harrison's words stick in his mind: *you can kill him*. Severus wants nothing more than to take the burden of the Dark Lord's demise from his son's hands.

"Of course I will help you, *farzandam*."

Lord Nott

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

This time, Theo's birthday has some complications.
Next time, Harry has a birthday surprise in store.

Harry? Where are you?

The Black Castle in Wales. With Magnus and Severus and Remus.

Why?

To talk about soul-bits. And how we can do something about them.

There's something else too.

Harry?

Be honest with me.

I can feel something in the bond. Like maybe you're pulling away. It's like it was at Privet Drive.

I'm writing this down, but only because you're worried. I wanted to tell you in person. The edges have been bad tonight. The worst they've ever been.

Tell me.

I didn't mean to, the magic took me there, but I ended up at the tower.

What happened then?

I was right on the edge, but then Death turned up. She kind of ... talked me down, I guess? Then Kreacher was there, he pulled me back. And then I called Severus and he came. But yeah. Edges.

Was it something we read in the diary?

I just got overwhelmed, Theo. It's, like, a fucking lot. All the soul-bits stuff. I didn't mean to go to the Tower, I just disappeared into the Hogwarts magic and it spat me out there and then I realised how shit I felt and it all just kind of happened. Then we came here.

Okay.

Are you okay?

Yeah. I'm okay now. Chatted with Mags and Remus and did some occlumency with Severus. We've got a new plan about how we could use the horcruxes and occlumency to gang up on Tom. Dumbledore's plan was shit anyway.

Tell me?

Better to explain in person. We can talk about it all properly after your birthday.

Do you feel okay?

I feel steadier now.

Good.

I'm really sorry.

You have nothing to feel sorry for.

You're not mad at me for going to the tower?

No. I'm not mad at you for having feelings, your feelings aren't bad, Harry. I'm not mad because you called for help. You told me. You're not keeping it a secret from me this time.

Yeah. Severus and Remus have decided I need to leave.

Before Dumbledore's imminent demise?

Yeah. Before term ends.

When?

After your birthday.

I knew it could happen, I knew it would happen but it feels so much sooner than I thought it would.

Yeah. For me too. I'm scared.

Me too. But we have each other, we have our friends, we have Sahara.

And your birthday. At least we have your birthday.

Yes. At least we have that.

And if we do this, if we get through it, we'll get all the other birthdays .

Harry Potter. You are so lovely.

What? Why?

Nothing. Yes. Yes to all the other birthdays.

I'll be back soon. I'll come to your dormitory and we can talk about it.

Please do.

Then sleep for a few hours. I'm so fucking tired.

I'll stay up for you.

My life and my secrets.

My life and my secrets, beloved.

Theo. Theo, wake up.

There's a voice in Theo's dreams, a golden voice that falls like feathers.

I'm sleeping, Theo tells it. He swears he hears a soft chuckle.

Wake up, the voice is closer and the feathers are soft against his cheek. *I've got a surprise.*

Theo rolls over, blinking, finding Harry resting his head on his hand beside him, looking down on him with a grin. Words fall into Theo's mind: *Happy birthday.*

"Harry," Theo stretches, staring at him. "Are you ... did you wake me up by speaking through the bond?"

"Yep," Harry's grin widens. "I've been practising."

"Is that my birthday present?"

"No," Harry rolls his eyes. "I just thought it would be nice."

"It is."

Theo leans up to kiss him. He's tired, Harry returned to school after midnight last night and the two of them sat for hours whilst Harry went over his plan and the messages Death had given him about holding the horcruxes inside Harry's mind until the optimum moment. Then, as Harry fell into an exhausted sleep against his chest, Theo lay awake for an extra hour thinking it all through. As a warrior, Theo can see the value in an ambush with the element of surprise, but something still feels off about Harry's account of last night, as if he's missing something. He understands that as a Mage with a necromancy gift, Harry is the perfect candidate for using soul magic this way. There's also the fact that Harry is the only person on the planet the Dark Lord will be so drawn by as to be distracted enough for an ambush, but there's a niggles in the back of Theo's head about it all. It's not just the fact of Harry's confession about how he had stood on the pinnacle of Astronomy tower and put his feet over the edge. As he fell into a restless sleep, Theo has seen it, over and over again, imagining

Harry's perfect curls ruffling in the breeze. Now, waking, Theo still knows deep in his bones that something is still a little wrong but he just can't quite catch it. No doubt it all would be clearer with more than two hours sleep, but he has an inkling that the answer lies in the journal. *Harry saw something in Tom Riddle's journal. That's why he left last night and went to the tower.* Harry said he was overwhelmed but overwhelmed by *what*? Theo decides he will give Harry until the end of the school day to open up to him, after all, Harry might still be ruminating, but after that, he will translate it himself. Ignorant of his turbulent thoughts, Harry drops a gift in a crepe box into his lap.

"This is your present," Harry says. "I had Griphook make it. Well, Griphook had someone else make it, his craft isn't smithing but he knows a good one, apparently."

"Smithing?" Theo unwraps it. It's his knife, his own knife. He stares up at Harry. "What did you do?"

Harry grins. "See the little rune there?"

Theo sees a tiny, new rune scratched into the base of the handle. He doesn't know how he has missed it.

"Yes."

Harry takes hold of it.

"*Nebmâ*," Harry says, his voice harsher in khuzdul. A new blade appears, one that isn't in the selection of weapons that Theo's blade that he inherited from his mother holds. It is curved and gold with runes etched into it and the violently sharp end is tipped in something dark.

"Basilisk venom," Harry says in a hushed voice. "Perfect for ... y'know, soul bit vessels."

Theo stares at the weapon. He can't help but hope he gets a chance to use it, imagines plunging it into Tom Riddle's diary, like Harry did in second year. It is simultaneously the most unexpectedly elegant and dark gift he has ever been given.

"It's beautiful." He pressed the rune at the base and flips it closed. When he opens it again, his normal blade is there, the same one he has used for potions all his life.

"I didn't want to tip your potions knife with it," Harry says nervously. "Could fuck up your brews."

"It would have. How did you get this from me without me noticing?"

"Oh, well." Harry has the presence of mind to look abashed. "Kreacher's been sort of stealing it at night and taking it to Gringotts. They actually finished it last week and it's just had a timed goblin glamour on the rune."

Theo stares at him. There are times, he thinks, when there is no one he knows as well as Harry Potter, but other times, he is completely knocked for six by the boy he loves.

“All right, Heir of Slytherin,” Theo kisses Harry on his blushing nose. “And the word to activate it ...?”

“*Nebmâ*, ” Harry repeats. “To spear.”

“*Nebmâ*, ” Theo repeats, holding the rune and the blade appears. “I hope I will have a use for it.”

“Me too. Though I suppose we’ll have to make sure I’m in proximity when you do so I can, like, suck up some soul bits into my mind cupboard.”

“Harry,” Theo groans and pushes his forehead against Harry’s shoulder. “Can you please try and use the proper words? It sounds fucking dreadful when you say you’re going to ‘suck up some soul bits’ like some kind of ... of ...”

“Hoover?”

“What the fuck is a hoover?”

“Muggle machine for cleaning floors, uses suction to pull up the dirt like – whoosh!” Harry smirks. “Like me. I’m going to be a soul-bit hoover.”

“You are doing this deliberately.”

“It’s much less scary to say that than what you and Severus say.”

“To absorb horcruxes into your hidden mindscape?”

“Yeah! Exactly!”

“Come here, you idiot,” Theo pulls Harry close. “Fine. Be a hoover.”

“I will, thanks,” Harry smiles and hands him another gift.

“Oh.” Theo flushes deeply, his heart racing with anticipation. “This is ... our fifth gift?”

“Um, no, it’s not. No, this is ... this is just something silly and extra, for your birthday.”

“Oh.” Theo tries to hide his surprise. He knows that Harry was planning to give him his fifth courting gift on his birthday. They spoke about it all those weeks ago at All Hallows Eve. Harry seems to be uncomfortable and Theo can’t work out why. He opens the package. It’s a monster pack of muggle biro pens, the ones he keeps stealing from Harry.

“This is a very pointed gift,” Theo says and Harry laughs.

“There’s a hundred. Hermione says each one can write for about a mile, so ... it should be okay whilst we’re apart.”

Theo stares at the packet of pens. A hundred miles. The time it would take to use it all stretches in front of him like an endless rope. *I really hope I get Harry back before I run out.*

“So we’ve got no excuse, right? Not to talk all the time?”

Theo feels the nervousness in Harry's voice. He looks over Harry's shoulder at the old pixie jar filled with dried lavender that used to sit in their bedroom at Spinners End and will now sit in the dormitory with Theo when Harry is gone. Harry and Lupin will leave the country in twenty four hours and Granger will join them when term ends. Theo will not go with them. As planned, he will go with Blaise to the Giardino for Yule, ready to sit for the first time in the Wizengamot on the 1st of January as Lord Nott. The changes they have been planning for, the distance they've been preparing for, it is suddenly upon him. *He'll be gone tomorrow and I don't know when I will sleep in the same bed with him again.*

“Yeah, absolutely no excuse,” Theo leans forward and kisses him carefully, tasting the relief on his lips. “We’ll talk all the time, I promise.”

The kiss is soft, long, wonderful, but Theo can feel Harry's exhaustion, the way his body still lightly vibrates and Theo has a sudden vision of the tower, tall and dark in the night. He presses a hand against Harry's chest, encouraging their lips to separate.

“How do you feel after last night?” He asks. “The Tower? Your edges?”

Harry takes a heavy breath and presses his face into Theo's sternum.

“They're okay. Having Death literally tell me I'm not allowed to kill myself is weirdly effective.”

Theo smiles. Despite the twist in his heart, he still finds Harry's glibness in the face of insurmountable pain as admirable as he did when they were brewing in the Scout Hut.

“I imagine Hel has her own intimidations.”

“She's nice. Kind. Gets me, I think. God, that's weird to say.”

Theo kisses the top of his head and thinks about the questions inside his mind, not clearly formed yet.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me about last night?”

“Later, okay?” Harry scrunches up his nose and pushes his face up towards to Theo's. “It's your birthday, there should be less talking and more other things.”

“Other things?”

A charming and wicked grin splits Harry's face. The kiss that comes is Theo's favourite kind, tasting like electricity with sparks of the Slytherin magic at the edges. Theo reaches for the edge of Harry's t-shirt, thinking to himself that there is honestly no better way to start his birthday but then there is a pop and suddenly, Kreacher is beside them, watching them carefully.

“Privacy please?” Harry glares at his elf, his fingers stroking Theo's hip but the elf scowls and shakes his head.

“Lord Prince calls Heir Nott,” Kreacher says “Must go to his office. Heir Nott’s goblin is there.”

“Ironfang?” Theo’s stomach drops. This can only mean one thing.

“Yes.” Kreacher looks at Harry. “Master is to come too, but Lord Prince says stay hidden.”

“Okay.” Harry scrambles to pull his school jumper over his pyjamas. Theo does the same.

“What’s this about?”

“My ring. I have to take the ring in order to be Lord Nott.”

“Now?” Harry looks at the clock. “It’s five thirty in the morning!”

“I was born at five thirty in the morning,” Theo says. “Will you use Sahara?”

“Yeah.” Sahara is suddenly around Harry’s neck and Harry clamps a hand on Kreacher’s head before shimmering into invisibility. “Ready to go?”

Theo takes a deep breath and wonders if he possibly can be ready for this moment. *Heart be the bolder.*

“Yes.”

Kreacher pops them immediately into Snape’s office, and Theo feels Harry touching him on the back in encouraging way. Theo notices how Snape’s eyes immediately begin to rove the empty air for signs of his son, nostrils flaring slightly. Not for the first time, Theo wonders if Snape’s ability to sense out magic was the precursor for Harry’s own enhanced Mage senses.

“Mr Nott, thank you for joining us,” Snape says. He looks exhausted. The office is full to the brim with brews and Theo wonders if he returned from Wales last night and came straight in here to set himself to potions. From some of the ingredients, Theo can tell that he’s brewing for Harry. *Stockpiling potions*, Theo realises, *for Lupin to take and care for Harry with tomorrow*. “Your account manager has need of your presence.”

“Yes, I do.” Ironfang gives Theo a long stare. He has not been in the presence of his account manager since he took his heir ring and then that was part of a ceremony with his father and Aunt and Ironfang said nothing to him. “You have been making waves, young man. Your father was not a man who made waves.”

“He was not, but we sail different waters, he and I.”

“Hmm,” Ironfang holds a box in his hand that Theo knows must contain the Lordship ring. “Heir Nott, are you aware of the confidentiality clauses between goblins and their clients?”

“I am.”

“Good.” Ironfang turns to look at Snape. “You may leave me with my client, Professor Snape.”

“Of course,” Snape’s voice is soft. His eyes fix on a point over Theo’s shoulder. “I shall just be in my quarters, gentlemen.”

He leaves, Kreacher following him.

“Here is a letter that was sent to me in the strictest confidence by your father upon his demise,” Ironfang hands it to Theo. “I wish you to understand my position before we proceed.”

Theo unfolds the paper with shaking hands.

Ironfang,

My son has made his choices, as I have made mine. His choice, however, requires more attention than even mine ever did. As you have protected my assets and held my accounts through the turbulence of the Dark Lord’s rise and fall and subsequent resurrection, now you must help my son weather the storms that may come from bonding himself to the Lord Potter-Black apparent. I do not speculate on the details of their bond, but I suspect he has taken a Lord, both romantically and literally. I do not need to tell you how deep your secret must be kept, you have always been most discreet. I have included a sum in my will that you are to use directly to ward Nott castle as vigorously as you would any stronghold in England. If he ever needs to retreat, make it so that no wixen or creature could touch him there. Otherwise, use all our financial means to ensure my son does not bring shame to my name.

Sókn en þola

Lord Nott.

Theo looks up from the paper. There is something embarrassing about knowing his account manager has read his father's suspicions that Theo is a romantic vassal to Harry as much as Bellatrix Lestrange is to the Dark Lord. Ironfang seems to know it is too much to ask Theo to confirm his father's suspicions. He sighs and walks to the fire. He throws in a handful of powder and shouts something in khuzdul. In a whirl, another goblin appears in the fire. Griphook steps out, looking tautly at Theo.

“Heir Nott,” he says. “I suppose we are here to witness your Lordship? Where is my client?”

Ironfang gives Theo a steady, infuriated look.

“His account manager protects his confidentiality, I protect yours, and mutually, we protect the confidentiality you share together,” Ironfang says. “The taking of a Lordship ring like this must be witnessed. Do we have a witness present?”

Theo wonders why he suddenly feels so anxious.

“Harry?” He’s relieved that his voice doesn’t sound as tremulous as he feels. Immediately, Harry appears beside him, reading over his shoulder. Ironfang jumps, despite himself, and Griphook merely smiles knowingly.

“What does the last bit mean?” Harry demands, looking at the goblins. “Hey Griphook, may all of your enemies be thrown from towers and crushed like bugs.”

“Well met, Ward. May Lord Gaunt suffer painfully at your axe.”

“Not ‘your enemies?’ Going straight for Riddle are we? Fair enough.” Harry grins. “Hello, Ironfang. May all of your enemies drown in piles of gold.”

“Hmm.” Ironfang gives him a long, slow stare and then bows low to Harry. “You are well met, Ward. May your coffers overflow. You will witness my clients Lordship?”

“Yep.”

“You understand, Heir Nott, that in normal circumstances, a suitor would not be part of this ritual until the seventh gift was exchanged?” Ironfang says.

“I do, but there is no one else.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry frowns. “What’s the big deal? Lordship rings usually just show up, don’t they?”

“Not all Lordship rings behave as yours do, Ward,” Griphook smiles. “The Nott rings have their own secrets.”

“I don’t understand.”

Theo closes his eyes. He remembers the stories from his childhood, the vast, viking families both of his parents came from, who slowly and intently lost everyone until they were nothing but Apollonius, Medea, Jezebel and Theodore. The last of the Notts. *Ensure he does not bring shame to my name.*

“The transfer of heirships is supposed to be witnessed. I was meant to have brothers and sisters,” Theo sighs. “Mother lost babies. Apollonius and Jezebel lost brothers. Notts are supposed to have big families. I should have a brother or sister standing here, ready to be my heir, just as I was ready to be Apollonius’ heir.”

“Like the Weasleys, like how Charlie became Bill’s heir,” Harry says.

“The magic of the House of Nott is a clan magic of those Ancient Norse tribes,” Ironfang grunts. “It requires trusted witnesses. Ideally of the family but Jezebel Nott did not answer the call this morning.”

“She would not answer for me,” Theo says bleakly.

“We can do this without her, I’m a trusted witness,” Harry says staunchly. “What do I have to do?”

“You witness the taking of the mantel with your magic,” Ironfang says. “When the ring is taken, you touch it with your ringed hand and give the new Lord his new name.”

“New name?” Harry raises an eyebrow.

“Theodore Asger Apollonius Nott,” Ironfang says.

“No,” Theo shakes his head. “No, not his.”

“The new Lord takes the name of the previous Lord,” Ironfang frowns. “It is how it has always been done.”

“I want my mother’s. Not his.”

“You cannot have her name she was not a Lord.”

“Then her father’s name,” Theo feels urgency rising in him. “Or her mother’s name. Or the name of her sainted ancestor. Something of her. Not of him. I won’t carry him all my life. No.”

“It’s okay,” Harry is there, stroking his back, soothing him, but Theo is finding all of this so much harder than he thought it would be. He takes a couple of deep breaths and closes his eyes, twisting his heir ring on his hand. *I will not be tethered to Apollonius this way. It is unbearable.*

“Her father’s name was Emil, her mother’s name was Magda, the sainted ancestor on her mother’s side was Santa Fabiola,” Theo says slowly, repeating names as if dredging them up out of his memories. Grandparents he never got to meet, a legacy that stretched back to Italy through Grandmother Magda and Norway through Grandfather Emil. “Any of those, but not his name, never his name.”

There is a long silence. All Theo can hear is Apollonius, very early in his life, saying: *there are so few Norse wixen in Britain, Theodore. Your mother’s father sheltered me after my own father died, for a while. We were the same.*

“What was the House Medea Nott came from?” Griphook says.

“A minor Scandinavian clan, no Wizengamot Seats,” Ironfang says. “Clan Skuld.”

“Skuld?” Theo opens his eyes and stares at Harry’s rune. “Skuld’s net.”

“Huh?” Harry frowns. “You’re mum’s clan has the same name as my rune?”

“It is a common name from mythology, the rune is named for the goddess who threaded destiny, it is a coincidence,” Ironfang hesitates. “But the name Skuld would be acceptable. The Norwegian goblins do not deal in Ancient and Noble Houses, after all, only in Clans. It is a Lordship equivalent.”

“Yes, I want Skuld.” His mother’s words fill his head as he stares at Harry’s rune marked throat. *Urd, Verdande and Skuld wove together the past, present and future.*

“Very well, let us proceed.” Ironfang opens the small box. “When you are ready, Heir Nott.”

He is not sure he is. He looks between the larger blue stone, set almost identically to his own Heir ring and yet, when he looks at it all he sees is Apollonius. He feels a sudden fear about giving up his heir ring. After all, it has been everything to him. His most innate magic. *Who am I without it? What if Apollonius’ ring changes me?*

“Hey, look at me,” Harry suddenly steps in front of him, eyes glowing green and gold, slipping quickly into parseltongue as he holds his hands. *“The ring isn’t magic, okay? You have the Nott magic already, right here –,”* Harry kisses Theo’s palm quickly, *“– inside you, and that ring is just another way for it to be with you and know you. It’s not Apollonius or anything to do with him. The magic already knows you, so don’t be afraid, okay? You know who you’re meeting.”* Harry strokes his hair gently and slips back into English. “And you’ll still be you, okay?”

Theo is overwhelmed with gratitude to be so understood. He nods and steps forward. Ironfang nods approvingly.

“You are Theodore Asger Nott, the Heir to the House of Nott,” he says. “You are relieved of your Heir ring. *Sókn en pola.*”

“*Sókn en pola,*” Theo repeats, twisting his heir ring off his finger as it glows softly blue and feeling surprised by how easily it slips away.

“What does it mean?” Harry mutters.

“Motto of the House of Nott,” Theo says. “Fight and Endure.”

“You are the Lord Nott Apparent,” Ironfang goes on, giving Harry a dirty look for interrupting. “Will you take on the mantle of your Lordship?”

“This is way more faff than mine,” Harry hisses, parseltongue drifting through the spot where his hand is on Theo’s back. *“What’s wrong with giant magic snake or a dead dark Lord to give a Lordship ring?”*

Theo smirks. Ironfang looks outraged but this is exactly how Theo wants it to be. He doesn’t want to take his Nott Lordship like he took his heirship, stoic and trembling and overwhelmed. He wants to take it joyfully, irreverently, like his relationship with Harry.

“I will take on the mantle of this Lordship,” Theo says. He picks up the ring, sliding it onto the first finger of his right hand. It is cool and familiar and then he sucks in his breath. The Nott magic is the same, it is as it has always felt inside him, but now it is different. He is not Harry, he has no other way to say it, except that it is *more*. There is more strength, there is more power, there is more wisdom, there is more *certainty*.

This is the ring that will help me become the Sorcerer, Theo thinks, without even meaning to, but immediately the blue glow intensifies around the larger stone as Ironfang steps back.

“You are Lord Theodore Asger Skuld Nott,” Ironfang says. “*Sókn en pola.*”

“*Sókn en þola*, ” Theo repeats.

“Witness?” Ironfang barks at Harry. He gently places his left hand on Theo’s, the hand with the Black diamond in it.

“Lord Theodore Asger Skuld Nott, I witness you,” Harry says, then, in hesitant Norse, echoes: “*Sókn en þola*. ”

Theo gasps as blue light spirals out of his ring, joining helixes with the white light of the Black magic, dancing together on the air and down their arms. Theo doesn’t have the words to explain it, but it feels like the Black magic is chasing the Nott magic, encouraging it, questing it to go further and deeper inside him. For a moment, there is a flash of conviction inside of him as the magic chases every potions recipe and healing spell he has ever learned. He remembers lying in bed with Harry under the duvet on the day of the Hogsmeade visit, fantasising that he might become a healer, just like his mother. Apollonius raised him as a warrior. He thought he was only a warrior but the magic inside him feels differently. There is his mother’s voice, repeating over and over: *The Nott magic is healing magic, Theodore. Healing magic*. Strangely, he thinks of Severus Snape, the dreadful day Theo brought Harry back from the Ministry of Magic to the hospital wing, so sure and confident in his proficiency as a Envouter. *A battlefield healer, a warrior and a healer*. Theo doesn’t believe in prophecy in the same way Dumbledore does, but his Norse heritage has given him a strong sense of the Skuld’s net, the web of fate and wryd, wrapping around and twisting through his life. Now he feels it. When he looks at Harry, his eyes are black.

“*Lækni*,” Harry whispers, and Theo realises that the Nott magic must have given him that Norse word. “Healer.”

Then just as quickly, Harry’s eyes are green again and he is smiling fondly as the magic sinks into their skin.

“It is done,” Ironfang says. “Though it was one of the most unusual I have seen.”

“That is a common issue with Ward as the Black Lord Apparent,” Griphook says.

“We can clearly drop the ‘apparent’ between us,” Ironfang snorts, looking at Harry’s Black diamond. “That was a Lord’s binding. In light of this, you both must be cautious. Romances and bonds between two such powerful Lords, such young Lords –,”

“It’s happening, deal with it,” Harry snaps.

“You can see why his Majesty enjoys him so much,” Griphook snorts with laughter.

“Indeed,” Ironfang gives Theo another appraising look as he closes the box on his heir ring. “The heirship ring will be kept in the custody of Gringotts until an heir is named. Hopefully your Aunt will be more amenable on that day to helping you in your naming, Lord Nott, you know how important a family member is in that ceremony.”

“I hope so,” Theo says. Jezebel might hate him but she would not stand in the way of the future of the line of Nott. Ironfang nods curtly.

“Good day, Lord Nott. May all your enemies feel the sting of your blades.”

“Good day, Ironfang,” Theo inclines his head. “May yours suffer under the weight of your ledgers.”

Ironfang nods and throws powder on the floo before disappearing. Griphook gives Harry a cheerful nod and disappears. Harry sighs and leans his head on Theo’s shoulder.

“So?” Theo whispers, turning to kiss his curls.

“So what?”

Theo lifts his new Lordship ring and wiggles it.

“Does it smell the same?”

“Yes,” Harry turns to smile at him. “Exactly the same.”

There is a lightness in Theo’s heart that he can’t account for.

“Good.”

Theo leans in for a kiss but the door opens and Professor Snape is there, rubbing his hands distractedly.

“Harrison, you need to sort which of these books you want, Kreacher is taking them this morning,” Snape’s eyes flicker to Harry’s ring, to the bracelet there that tells Harry’s vitals. “And your father is calling through the floo.”

Theo understands why Harry’s parents are frantic and worried, but there’s something different about the way Snape’s eyes drift constantly back to Harry’s scar. Theo doesn’t know why but it feels odd.

“Any symptoms this morning?” Snape asks. Theo finds it strangely non-specific, as if Snape is couching his words in front of Theo. *Why would he do that?*

“I’m okay,” Harry leans in to kiss Theo’s cheek goodbye. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Harry,” Theo catches his hand as he pulls away. “And we’ll ... talk more about it all later?”

“Birthday fun first, talking later,” Harry squeezes his hand and Theo feels words in the bond. *I love you.*

“You too,” Theo says, and leaves Harry and his Sire to prepare for tomorrow. Theo is not sure that even the most elaborate of birthdays will distract him from the fact that tomorrow, Harry is leaving Hogwarts, and both he and Professor Snape have a tentativity to them this morning that isn't entirely accounted for by Harry's story. Theo looks down at his new lordship ring where it glows softly blue with its new power. At least he is newly equipped. When he looks up, Kreacher is standing in front of him.

“Kreacher will take you back.”

“Thanks, Kreacher.”

“Hmm.” Kreacher gives him a strange, almost annoyed look and then performs a funny little jerk of his head which Theo thinks might be a bow. “Lord Nott.”

“Yeah,” Theo feels the words settle around him. Lord Nott, a Lord alone. He will have to get used to it. “Let’s go.”

Before breakfast, Blaise and Daphne give him gifts. They are surprisingly meaningful, both gifting him items that carry with them the strength of their houses. Daphne gifts him an orchid brooch, white and waxy and enchanted to never wilt, embedded with blue sapphires for eyes.

“I had father withdraw it from the vault,” she says softly, pinning it to his robes lapel. “You may be Lord Nott now but you have a place amongst us.”

"I know I can count on your father's counsel."

"Speaking of," she smiles and hands him a letter. "Your first Wizengamot session is on the 1st of Janaury. He has some considerations for you."

"I am sure he does," Theo takes the letter and sees it has been opened. He smiles at her. "Do you also have considerations for me?"

"I might have."

Blaise gifts him a tie pin with the the likeness of the Goddess Diana captured in amber, just like Blaise’s heir ring. It is not a trinicria, but it is as close as a friend of the Zabini’s can get to wearing their holy symbols.

“We hope it will not offend your Norse sensibilities, to wear our goddess now and again,” Blaise says.

“I honour my own in my own way,” Theo says. “Thank you for this, shield.”

“And there is this,” Blaise says, withdrawing a furled parchment and handing it to Theo. “This is a treaty with the House of Zabini. Not a bear wands, exactly, but something that reflects our ... mutual affection.”

Theo looks it over, Blaise answering any questions he has. It is a neat piece of legal work, promising resources and shelter to Theo, everything besides promising to bear wands on his behalf.

"The Contessa has signed this?" Theo says in amazement. "This is the kind of treaty reserved for politicians."

"You have a Wizengamot seat, you will make laws, you are a politician." Blaise taps the slot at the end of the parchment where magic has left a gold, glowing dot. "All that is left is your signature, Lord Nott."

Theo signs it. He can only imagine what Ironfang will think when he sees this in his inbox. At breakfast, he looks around for Harry but he is nowhere to be seen, perhaps savouring a last breakfast with his sire. At the Slytherin table, his house mates treat him with surprising deference. Fitz flushes and mumbles as he gives him a book on runes and wards, Theo wonders if perhaps he is anxious about the vows they will be taking later today to induce him into Theo's wardship. When he sits down, Astoria gifts him a fascinating book on Potioneers, delivered with shy smile which Theo gratefully accepts.

"I hope you like it, Lord Nott," she says.

"I do," Theo flicks through the contents of renowned Potioneers and seeing no Severus Snape, automatically thinks that is an oversight. "But I hope I can still be Theo to you, Astoria."

"I'd like that," she says, eating eggs with a smile. "There's a fascinating chapter in it on Arsenius Jigger. He was Professor Snape's Master, wasn't he?"

"He was."

Since Theo helped Astoria with her Potions homework over the holidays, he's noticed an improvement in her interest around the subject. All throughout term, he has been loaning her books and getting small, one line reviews on them. It has been making Daphne very happy and she is smiling broadly as she joins them and Blaise in a discussion about whether Jigger's contribution of the Invigoration Potion was in fact more important than the renowned contribution of Gregory the Smarmy with his Unctuous Unction.

"Smarmy is often thought of as the founder of Potions," says Blaise.

"But his potion didn't help anyone, it just tricks people!" Astoria says, animatedly. "The Invigoration Potion can save a person's life, it –,"

Astoria stops speaking, eyes wide, looking over Theo's shoulder. Daphne frowns. Theo looks up to see Rosier standing beside him, smiling charmingly.

"Congratulations, Theodore. Happy birthday."

"And since it is his birthday, any well-raised Heir should know that his proper address is now *Lord Nott*," Daphne says, giving Rosier a level stare. He only smiles coldly back.

"Even for friends known in childhood?"

Theo gives him an equally cold smile.

"If you will return the favour when you come into your own, Felix."

Theo hopes it will be soon.

"If you are alive to see it." They all turn to see Draco muttering behind his glass a few people down, his eyes fixed on them all resentfully. Theo wonders what kind of bad mood Draco has to be in to be silently sitting and stewing as he watches four people have a debate about potions. "Where's your *intended* this morning, Zabini?"

"Oh, I am sure you know," Blaise says easily. "You seem particularly obsessed with your cousin."

"I am not obsessed with that *failure* of the House of Black –!"

"Thank you, Draco," Rosier says, cutting across Draco easily who buries his nose in his cup. Then his eyes drift to Theo's new lordship ring, his Zabini tie pin and his Greengrass broach. "I hope you have a wonderful day, Theodore. May you wear your new lordship as easily as you wear the favour of your friends."

"I am blessed in my treaties," Theo says. He feels Blaise and Daphne taut against possible insults.

"Yes, you are clearly a man who knows a good alliance when he sees it," Rosier nods at both Blaise and Daphne. "I hope you have the wisdom to let it serve you today. *Bon anniversaire.*"

Rosier walks away, tapping Draco's shoulder as he goes and pulling him up to whisper in his ear. Draco's face pales but he throws Theo a bitter glare.

"What is that about?" Blaise asks.

"I do not know." Theo is not sure he wants to find out.

"Well, come. Even Lord's must attend lessons," Daphne says.

Theo expects it to be much like any other school day, but as his lessons begin, he is surprised by the number of people who congratulate him. In Arithmancy, he is paired with Boot and he asks some quiet, thoughtful questions about voting power. In Herbology, Longbottom gives him a long, considered look and then sticks out his hand to shake.

"Next year, we will be the youngest Lords in the Wizengamot," he says. "I hope we will work well together."

Theo nods in agreement, feeling astonished. Daphne smirks knowingly beside him as they stand over their devil's snare saplings.

"You are surprised."

"I am."

“You do not realise how much people watch and what they notice. We have been walking and eating and studying with Blaise and Harry for nearly a year. Our alignment is clear. People have hopeful expectations of you, Lord Nott.”

Theo pats the earth around his hissing sapling thoughtfully. In all the effort he has made to hide his true association with Harry he has not considered what the practical implications of the association everyone saw. Maybe he will not have to make such an effort to assert his neutrality as he anticipated. At lunchtime, Harry is back in the school population, telling everyone that he's been in the hospital wing having some treatment on his hand. Theo knows that he's been in his sire's quarters, in his journal Harry says it is partly packing, partly Snape wanting to keep an eye on him. A part of him is not surprised, Snape and Lupin must be scrambling to get Harry ready to leave and utterly devastated about last night, but it does seem strange. Even when Harry has had suicidal thoughts in the past, Snape has been unmovable on Harry continuing in his routine. Theo sits down to eat, wondering if talking about it through the bond over lunch is the best move, but a surprise pink box appears in front of him. It says 'Hapee Birthdae' on it. Theo smirks, remembering Harry's story about his misspelled birthday cake. He opens it, the cupcake inside is badly decorated with wonky icing and hundreds and thousands. Theo tries to remember the last time anyone handmade a birthday cake for him and remembers him and his mother, cooking together, a task that on birthdays and Jul she would never allow the House elves to complete. Something warm fills his heart and when he risks a glance at Harry, who is sitting beside Blaise two seats down, he sees a slight extra pinkening in those beautiful cheeks. Harry has skipped classes to make this, has used Kreacher and the Hogwarts house elves to deliver it, and Theo thinks is so unbearably sweet he might have to launch himself across bodies to kiss him. Instead, Theo dips a finger tip into the vanilla icing and thinks through the bond, trying not to look at Harry: *thank you*.

You're welcome.

Before Theo can properly tuck in, Professor Snape sweeps down from the teacher's table towards him, jerking his head.

“You are needed,” he says.

Theo slides the cupcake box into his pocket and follows, expecting that Snape needs help with a brew he's preparing for Harry's departure but Professor Snape doesn't lead him down to the dungeons. Instead, they walk up to Narcissa's office. Snape takes a pause outside and shoots up some silencing spells. Theo feels a thrill of trepidation.

“The Minister for Magic is here. He desires an audience with Lord Nott.”

Theo sucks in a breath, tasting curdling vanilla on his tongue. He expected this, somewhere in the back of his mind he knew it was coming, but not today. Not now.

“And Dumbledore let him in?”

“Albus is not able to defer the Minister for Magic from entering any school in his governance. I am told.” There is particular venom in the way Snape says these words today and Theo thinks: *Albus Dumbledore has really pissed Snape off in the last twenty four hours.*

Theo doesn't know why, but carefully adds it to his mental list of one of the ways Harry's sire is behaving differently today.

"So I will be alone with him?"

"Narcissa will be there. She will do nothing."

Theo understands. She can do nothing, she must do nothing, or the whole fucking house of cards of deception they are all involved in will crash down on their heads.

"I understand."

Snape nods firmly.

"You are a new Lord. If you do not wish to declare yourself or deny his desires, tell him you must consult with Lord Greengrass, who was until this morning, your guardian. Or say you will speak to your account manager. You can defer him today, at least. The Minister for Magic cannot bring violence to you inside the castle. Only words."

Theo nods, trying to absorb this advice as quickly as he receives. *Defer him. Defer the Minister for Magic.* Snape gives him a steady look.

"Endure the Morketid, Lord Nott," he says.

Theo nods and Snape presses open the door.

"Minister, Lady Malfoy," he says, holding open the door for Theo. "Lord Nott is here to see you."

Lucius Malfoy is standing behind Narcissa's desk, his wife at his shoulder.

"Lord Nott," Malfoy says with a wintry smile. "Do join me. You will know my wife, Professor Malfoy."

"Lord Nott is an excellent student," she says, with all the demureness that defies the sharp woman Theo knows her to be. For the first time ever, he sees the kind of mask Narcissa must wear for her husband. He wonders how long she has been wearing it. She gives Theo the most polite of nods but in her eyes, Theo is reminded of every past conversation they have ever had and, despite being sure that the Minister for Magic is not a legilimens, he erects his mind shield.

"Will you take a seat?" Malfoy says, pointing his cane to the seat in front of him. Theo does. He tells himself he must not look at Narcissa again now, not once, must treat her like the same ornament Malfoy does, less he endanger her. Malfoy eyes the stone on his finger.

"Congratulations on your Lordship, Lord Nott."

"Thank you, Minister."

"I come with a message from an old friend of your father."

“Oh?”

Theo is worried, for a moment, that the Dark Lord might have sent a letter or an ominous paper aeroplane like he does for Harry, but Malfoy simply sets a white mask on the desk between them. Theo recognises it, horribly. They are objectively beautifully carved, each one slightly unique, and this one, he knows. It is Apollonius'. He does not move to touch it or say anything.

“Lord Gaunt sends his regards on your ascendancy, Lord Nott,” Malfoy says. “He says it is time to step into your power at his side, just as your father did. As a most treasured friend.”

Theo remembers Apollonius' face in the memory he extracted from Slughorn. Blank and full of rage and betrayal. He remembers how easily the Dark Lord tossed Apollonius aside.

“I am not worthy of Lord Gaunt's friendship,” Theo says carefully. Malfoy smiles, as if this is the kind of thing he has been hoping to hear.

“A young man can learn to be worthy, Lord Nott,” he says, leaning forward. “The Dark Lord is generous beyond measure. He can provide for you just as he provided for your father. You will make him proud, I am sure.”

Theo thinks of what Snape told him, about how he can defer the Minister of Magic if he wants to, but he finds he does not want to. He thinks of Blaise and Daphne, who are walking through Hogwarts on the tightrope of political neutrality that challenges the ease of the Dark Lord's political control. It is not the opposition that Harry or Granger have been forced into, but it is necessary and valuable. If he is ever going to be what he hopes to be, to protect the people he wants to protect, it needs to start somewhere. Besides, he can't look at Lucius Malfoy without thinking about Harry's wounds from his torturous kidnapping in May, the tiny dot of the needle scar in his neck where Malfoy injected him with serum. He wants to skin this man alive for everything he did, but he can't do that. He can, at least, make sure he can only take bad news back to the Dark Lord and suffer the fucking consequences.

“The only sitting Lord I am concerned about making proud is Lord Greengrass, the man who has provided me unique guidance,” Theo says steadily, keeping his eyes on the table. “I will steer my ship by his course, Minister.”

Malfoy gives him a wintry smile.

“Ah, yes, I was told you had been ... perhaps blinded by the offers of Lord Greengrass,” Malfoy muses. Theo knows it is Rosier who has been doing the telling. “It's hardly surprising, given how close you and his daughter became when your father sought a courtship with her. I admit, many of us assumed that your father had merely changed trajectory and set his hopes on a future Lord Nott who was had one foot in Europe. Perhaps Apollonius' death allowed the Lord Potter-Black Apparent to steal the suitor who should have been yours.”

“Heir Zabini is my friend and ally,” Theo says quietly.

“Of course, of course,” Malfoy waves a hand. “Why, I recall the summer you were ... shall we say more than acquaintances? When we held the gala at Malfoy Manor?”

Theo remembers. It was his third year, when the Dark Lord was still an fantasy and at a summer gala after the Quidditch World Cup, Theo had danced the night away with Blaise and Lord Malfoy had announced for his guests that the Triwizard Tournament would be taking place. Theo is uncomfortable, suddenly, with the weight of his acquaintance with this man. *He has known me since I was a child.* Malfoy’s smile becomes slightly pitying, as if he sees the way of Theo’s thoughts. He softens his voice.

“After your dedication to the son of the Contessa, it is unsurprising she would hold sway over your political leanings. You should know, Lord Nott, the Contessa holds no political strength in England. A wise man follows the rising power in his nation, do you not think?”

Theo breathes slowly, taking in just how much the Dark Lord must know about him. He knows, of course, the phrase that Apollonius loved to use, *follow your power*, he knows that Theo has been friends with Daphne and Blaise since he was a child, he knows that Apollonius has sought courtships for him. It is strangely humbling and uncanny, to realise that his father must have, at some point since the summer of his return, sat down with Lord Gaunt and told him all about his life and his son. *Did he want to? Would he have rather have kept me a secret from Lord Gaunt?*

“A wise man values and honours his friendships and alliances,” Theo says. “I have a treaty with the House of Zabini and the House of Greengrass.”

“And the House of Black? You did such a wonderful job of representing the Zabini interests at the Wizengamot in July.” Malfoy pounces, eyes glinting. Theo keeps his expression neutral.

“I have no treaty with that house but I will not raise arms against my friend's future family,” he says evenly. “I will not renege on my treaty with the Contessa Zabini. I will continue to be guided by Lord Greengrass in the Wizengamot. I have made my choices.”

“Yes, it seems you have,” Malfoy considers him steadily. “Which is interesting, given that you surely know, first hand, the impact choosing to disobey Lord Gaunt can have on your family. Your dear mother, after all ...she was not as supportive of your father’s choices as she could have been. There are consequences for such faithlessness. I would think you had learned better from her disloyalty.”

Theo holds his breath. He will not look at Narcissa, he will not, but he imagines that somewhere inside her own mind, there is a raging creature of anger hidden away for her friend who she sat with through grief, through lost children. He did not consider the fact that the secret of his mother's poisoning would be something the Dark Lord would share with his followers. Lucius Malfoy smiles cruelly. *Smug fucking git.*

“What I learned, Minister, is that proximity to Lord Gaunt, even for those who do not wear this –,” he nods to the white mask. “Is dangerous. I will take a lesson from my mother as you suggest. I will get no closer.”

“Ah, Lord Nott wishes to avoid the inevitability of the Dark Lord’s power,” Malfoy leans back with a sneer. “Lord Nott thinks that if he does not bow the Dark Lord will lose interest. You forget, Theodore, your father was the first to take the mark, the first to pledge his house and bend the knee. It is in your blood. What I offer you now is the chance to choose it willingly. Next time, the choice will not be yours at all.”

I chose Harry, Theo thinks. I will always choose him.

“We all have choices,” Theo says. “My seat is mine. My vote is mine. I am Lord Nott. I am not my father. This is my choice.”

“Hmm,” Malfoy gives him a steady, sharklike smile. “The Dark Lord anticipated this might be the case.”

Carefully, Malfoy withdraws something from his pocket. It is a ring. Theo doesn’t recognise it until he is staring at the small blue stone in a braided, gold band. Then he can see the hand, holding a martini glass or twisting his young wrist deliberately too hard or setting a smoking cigarette to the inside of his forearm, glowing meanly with cruel intention. Now dead and cold, a stone lost of its family magic, a symbol of death. Weirdly, he thinks of Harry returning to Privet Drive so the Dark Lord would not make a gift out of his dead relatives, of the present of Bellatrix’s severed finger sent to Harry on his birthday. The Dark Lord makes gifts and curses out of a man’s darkest desires. Carefully, Theo picks up the ring of Jezebel Nott.

The House of Nott

Chapter Notes

The update schedule is every WEDNESDAY gmt. One chapter per week of between 4K and 9K.

This time, The House of Nott changes.
Next time, did anyone ask for a party?

“How?” Theo manages to ask.

“Such a tragedy, died in her sleep this morning, or so the Ministry coroner says,” Malfoy tuts insincerely. Theo says nothing. All he can think of, strangely, is the day his mother died. The way his Aunt led him out of the room, away from her body, away from his father’s raw grief. He recalls how he had been a spluttering, heaving, sobbing mess that longed to stay with his face buried in his mother’s still-warm stomach, how he had needed to stay there, with Apollonius, to let their grief song blend and rise and howl to the uncaring Gods above, but his Aunt had pulled him away. He had trusted her then, followed her, because he knew no better. Now she is dead and Theo feels nothing, except a slowly waking irritation. *The Dark Lord is a fucking meddlesome dick.*

“I must admit, you do not seem sorrowful, Mr Nott.” Malfoy leans forward. “She was not kind, was she?”

He wonders exactly how this rumour was put about. Did Snape tell him? Did Apollonius speak of his abusive sister with the Death Eaters or even worse, with the Dark Lord? Both seem unlikely, but maybe Jezebel’s cruelty was just one of those pureblood secrets kept behind closed doors, like which families had squibs hidden away and which daughters had been compelled into marriage. In which case, Theo has even more reason to hate the man speaking to him, a man who maybe knew his plight all of his childhood and did nothing.

“The Dark Lord understands the limitations of family,” Malfoy goes on. “He offers new family, new camaraderie, where the bonds of blood have failed. He lets us know, through the reach of his arm, that there is no one he will not touch to secure us.”

“Oh?” Theo’s throat is dry.

“You yearned for Zabini? There are better, more majestic matches to be made, you could have a man more powerful than you have ever dreamed of,” says Malfoy. “The House of Rosier has expressed interest, for instance, or the Clan of Vulchanova, even. The Dark Lord provides more than can be imagined.”

So that is the Dark Lord's hope, to snare Theo and then use his ancient Norse name to lure the ancient clan of Vulchanova, the founding stones of Durmstrang, probably so he can have control over that school and its legacy too. Theo almost smirks at the idea that Felix fucking Rosier has expressed any interest in courting him. Felix has been told to express interest, more fucking like, probably at the end of a damn wand. On top of that, the notion that the Dark Lord could provide a man more powerful than Harry is just laughable.

"There is no lover he will not provide, no funds he will not create, no masters he will not induce to teach you, no enemy he will not destroy on our behalf." Malfoy seems oblivious of Theo's disgust. "His kindness is the sweetest balm. His generosity knows no bounds."

"But she died in her sleep," Theo says mechanically.

"Oh yes, of course," Malfoy pulls back. Theo can tell he thinks Theo will not bite on this particular line and is preparing to switch tactics. "Such a pity. Not just for you, to have lost an Aunt, but for the Nott magic. The Dark Lord mourns that you shall be the very last of such a distinguished line. He only hopes it will inspire some ... reflection."

"Reflection?"

"Upon your future. Upon the future of your house and magic. Since you are the last of your line now, you might want to consider how that line is spent. That your future is not too ... short."

Lucius Malfoy's smile is wintry and smug and Theo wants to curse it off his face.

"Thank you, Minister," he closes his hand around the ring of his dead aunt. "I am afraid I must get to class."

"Of course. You are still so young, after all. Unformed. You have so much to consider." The Minister stands up. "I will leave you. I will take your message back to Lord Gaunt. He will be most amused, I believe."

Theo wants to tell him that he doesn't give a flying fuck about what amuses Lord Gaunt, but instead decides to stand and bow politely. The Minister tucks the white mask back inside his robes and sweeps from the room without even saying goodbye to his wife. Theo stares down at the sister Nott ring in his hand. Before his Aunt wore it, it was once worn as his mother's ring. Once upon a time the sight of it was comfort to him, then it became terror and now it is nothing. Empty, without magic, like a hollow shell of a thing. When Theo looks at it, he wonders how muggles endure ordinary gemstones. The sight of a once magical ring now perished is a desolate thing. For some reason, it is more desolate to him than anything else he has been reminded of today. He cannot make himself miss Apollonius or mourn Jezebel but he does feel sorrow when he looks at the ring that once housed the Nott magic. *Another part of us, gone forever.*

"Gwion, call Harry."

"What?" He looks up to see Narcissa waving her wand over the door, casting silencing and locking spells and giving him furtive looks.

“Use the bond between you and call your Mage, Sorcerer,” she says quickly, coming over to gently tip the Nott ring out of his hand and set it on the table. “There will hopefully still be time.”

He does not know what she means but it is a measure of how much he trusts Narcissa now that he doesn’t hesitate. Theo takes a deep breath and looks inside of himself, reaching for the feeling in his chest of a gentle tightening that has been there since Harry left him and Granger alone the night before.

Come to Narcissa’s office. Come to Narcissa’s office. Come to Narcissa’s office. Come to Narcissa’s –

There is a speckling of magic in the corner of the room, the strangeness of Harry appearing out of nothing but Narcissa does not even blink.

“What’s the matter?” Harry winces, rolling his shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

“Take this ring, Harry,” Narcissa gestures quickly to the desk. “Quickly please.”

“Okay,” Harry frowns but when Theo nods, does as he’s told. “And?”

“How does it feel to you?” She asks gently. “Does it still contain any hints of the Nott magic?”

“The Nott magic?” Harry’s eyes widen. “Who’s ring is this?”

“My Aunt’s. The Dark Lord killed her. Probably thinking it could entice me or terrify me into service.”

It is strange to put words to this truth. His mother and aunt have both been murdered by the Dark Lord and Apollonius died in his service. *Tom Marvolo Riddle has been the ruin of the House of Nott.* Theo wonders on what planet the Dark Lord thinks Theo would ever consider joining him with such a track record.

“Okay,” Harry frowns. “I mean, that’s pretty typical of Tom. Are we ... sad?”

“We’re not sad.”

“I’m not saying he should kill people who annoy us but if I had a list –,”

“That’s not the problem,” Theo cuts him off before he names everyone they secretly hope the Dark Lord will kill.

“Then what is?”

“The Nott magic requires specific magical sequences to name an heir. It is a unique aspect that is very unusual among the Sacred Twenty Eight, a relic from the magic’s origin among the Norse clans. They require the magic of another Nott ring to recognise it for an heir to be named.” Narcissa says. Theo realises with a jolt that his mother must have told her. “The Dark Lord has ensured the end of the Nott line.”

Harry is frowning intensely.

“So when Apollonius died, your Aunt was the only Nott who could help you name an heir because she still had a Nott ring ...”

“Yes.” Theo swallows. “It will all end with me.”

“Not unless we intervene,” Narcissa says, eyes flashing. He understands Narcissa’s urgency. After all, for any wixen as dedicated to the protection of the pureblood lines as she, the notion that a family magic as old as the Notts simply dying on her watch is too much to endure. He is not sure if he feels the same urgency anymore. After all, what is the House of Nott worth when it is nothing but Theodore Nott? Harry is frowning down at the ring in his hand, turning it slowly in his fingers.

“Why doesn’t this ring have magic in it anymore?” Harry asks. “When Hermione took the Potter ring it just was ... there. Like it was waiting.”

“That’s unusual, Harry,” Narcissa says softly. “Usually, that only happens for Lordship rings and heirship rings. They are protected at Gringotts to hold their magic until they are called, but family rings are often only able to be passed between living wixen or, transferred between family members at the moment of death.”

“So, like, if another Nott had been there when she died –?”

“Yes,” Theo says. As he says the word he knows that even despite everything Jezebel did to him, he would never watch her death and let the magic in her ring die. He thinks about everything Harry has taught him about magic’s own sentience and thinks: *it was not the magic’s fault*. In his Lordship ring, he feels an answering warmth that spreads through his fingers. “This ring was once my mother’s and when she died, my Aunt wore it to keep the magic alive. I would have done the same if I could have.”

“Right, it’s like George told me about the Prewett magic,” Harry mutters. “Sahara says if magic has no one to wield through it returns to the deep place ...”

Theo and Narcissa glance at one another, to share the moment of strangeness in some of the things that come out of Harry’s mouth. Harry is looking determinedly at Narcissa.

“So what do you want me to do?” He asks.

“Because you are a Mage, if there is still magic hidden in the Nott ring, I believe you can kindle it, just as you did with your sister’s Potter ring. It will not require a living Nott to flourish,” Narcissa says quietly. “Then Theodore will not be the last of his line and his magic. The person who holds his family ring will then be able to help him name an heir, when he wishes. The magic will live on, lord to heir and to whomever the sister Nott ring is passed to. The future will not be ...” Narcissa’s lips twist slightly, half way between a smile and look of furious disdain. “Short.”

“And that’s what you want?” Harry turns to look at him. Theo understands his reticence. After all, only this morning Theo had been nervous about taking his Lordship ring, because

of how it might remind him of Apollonius, or be like him in some way. Ultimately, he would be more disgusted by any magic that reminds him of Jezebel.

“Yes,” Theo says. He looks deep into Harry’s eyes and thinks one thought, firmly: *It is not the magic’s fault*. Harry smiles proudly.

“Okay then,” he says. “Let’s just ... have a listen.”

He closes his eyes. Not for the first time in their relationship, Theo finds himself watching Harry in amazement, wondering at the marvel of him, silently communicating with magic inside his mind. Theo stares at the ring in Harry’s palm as his brows flicker, frown lines appearing.

“I think ... I think it’s there I just ...”

He opens his eyes and looks at Theo. He feels Harry’s thoughts forming in his mind.

I can do it. But I need to use the bond. Narcissa will see.

Theo takes a deep breath and wonders if it is worth the risk for the survival of the Nott magic, but then thinks of the glee the Dark Lord must have had in killing his Aunt, knowing he was cutting Theo’s own legacy off at the knees. *He does not get to control me like he did Apollonius*. And Narcissa is here, she is the one who thought all of this was possible. No one deserves this secret more than the woman fighting so hard to keep the Nott family legacy alive. Theo looks at Harry and nods. Harry turns to Narcissa, the Black magic sparkling down his limbs from his diamond.

“You will keep this secret in the deepest part of yourself, daughter of the House of Black,” he says. There is no need of a compulsion, Narcissa’s fealty vow is too strong, but it is a command deep from inside the Black magic and Narcissa’s Black ring shines like the beam from a lighthouse making Theo grimace. She bows low, bathed in the light of it, regal and unafraid. When she stands, Theo remembers that Harry and Narcissa were first introduced because Snape said she was the most magically controlled person he knew. Theo has had much experience of Narcissa’s intellect and kindness and loyalty, but not of this version of her. Eyes suddenly white as her hair, towering in beauty and fearful power. He wonders, suddenly, if all of the daughters of the House of Black are so transformed by the new power in their blood or if it just her. Just her majesty, her unfailing ruthlessness and fierce devotion that it embraces and embodies.

“You have my fealty, Black Prince. Always.” Her voice is so calm, as if this outburst of astonishing power was always supposed to be hers, and Harry nods. He turns to Theo, the shine of the Black magic dimming as he takes hold of his hand. When he speaks, his voice is a low hiss.

“My life and my secrets.”

The bond erupts between them, gold and blue, glorious and sparkling and Theo can barely breathe for the beauty of it. Harry’s eyes are glowing green and gold in the middle of it, one

hand holding Theo's, the other holding the Nott ring. Theo knows what must come next. Harry leans towards him and then stops, awkwardly glancing at Narcissa.

"Sorry about this, Narcissa, I don't mean to be weird," Harry mumbles, blushing suddenly as he looks nervously between them. "I just need to ..."

"Of course, my Lord," Narcissa instantly averts her eyes, folding her hands in front of her like she is a courting chaperone at a pureblood ball. Theo swallows an absurd desire to laugh, but Harry doesn't waste time pressing his lips to Theo's. The blood magic is instantaneous, Theo sees exactly where Harry's mind and magic has taken him, the wide, grey landscape where the Nott rings were mined and forged, to the crashing ocean and the salty spray that he imagines he can feel on his face. For a second, he sees nothing but thousands of acres of sky, then, abruptly, he sees his mother's face. Soft, kind, he notices a dimple in her left cheek that he had forgotten and a mole in the hollow of her throat, slightly bobbly to the touch. How could he have forgotten that? Her scent, too. He's never forgotten her rosy perfume but this is different, this is the scent of being around her, of her potions laboratory in the garden, the dried fennel seeds. *Mother*; he finds himself thinking, and then the Norse word, that has not been in his mind since before she died. He had forgotten that too: *Móðir*. The kiss is the work of a moment but when they pull apart, the ring in Harry's palm is glowing with the soft blue power of the Nott magic.

"Done." Harry drops Theo's hand and the bond vanishes inside of them, the snow falling outside making the air inside Narcissa's office seem cold and bleak. She looks at Theo with her steady blue eyes and he sees understanding there that wasn't there before.

"Merlin made a bond for Artorius and his lover," she says softly. Theo hesitates. He glances at Harry who nods. It is time for Narcissa to have this secret.

"He did," Theo says. "A unique bond."

The words sit unsaid between them all, the truth that Narcissa is bound by her fealty bond and the Black magic to keep a secret. *Fidelity*. The look that Narcissa gives Theo seems to be many things all at once, ferocity and satisfaction and perhaps even a little bit of pride. Then she looks at Harry.

"Your parents know?"

Harry nods.

"They have not always been ... enthusiastic," Theo admits.

"Well, of course not," Narcissa says quietly. "Those who are werewolf bonded know perhaps better than any wixen the burden and joys of this type of bond. I will join them in protecting it, with all I have."

The words make Theo consider the notion that all this time, have Snape and Lupin been protecting their bond? Has their reticence and silence all been clumsy attempts to just protect Harry from the ways they have both suffered, particularly Lupin? Harry simply nods and offers Jezebel Nott's ring to Theo.

“Who’s it going to?” Harry says, as the ring drops into Theo’s palm. It feels heavier than before, more alive somehow. “You could give it to Fitz I suppose, when you name him your Ward. Or Blaise.”

“No, it must be someone who can wear it secretly, so Lord Gaunt does not suspect his plans have been diverted,” Theo says. Besides, ever since he saw the smug look on Lucius Malfoy’s face, he’s known exactly who he would give this last legacy of the Nott magic to. This will be both revenge and justice in a tidy parcel, made sweeter by the fact he can think of no one better to gift it to. Theo turns to Malfoy’s wife, the ring in his hand.

“Will you keep this secret for me, Lady Black?”

“I would be honoured, Lord Nott,” Narcissa says, taking the ring and fitting it snugly onto the fourth finger of her right hand. If she is surprised, she hides it perfectly, but Theo wonders if such things can ever be surprising to a woman who scrys. It glows with a blue light and Narcissa smiles. It’s a strange smile, Narcissa’s are usually neat and performative, she shows her true satisfaction with nods and a fierce gaze that makes Theo feel as if there is something burning warmly inside him. This smile is for a moment but makes her look young; it is the smile of memory, Theo realises. Perhaps Narcissa is remembering the same ring on his mother’s hand.

“The Nott magic is healing magic,” Theo says to her. “I hope it will serve you well in times of need.”

“I am sure it will, I saw how it served your mother’s brews.” He watches as she glamours it with magic, but still he looks at the apparently naked finger, feeling a warmth inside him that the ring is there. It feels very right, suddenly, that this is where the ring of Medea Nott should rest whilst her son is at war.

“Come on,” Harry says, gently interrupting them by tugging Theo’s arm as he looks at the clock. “First period after lunch, we have to meet Blaise and Fitz at the Greenhouse.”

Theo had forgotten for a moment that school life will be going on outside, whilst he is here, being threatened into becoming a Death Eater. Theo nods and walks to the door, following Harry.

“Good luck with your ward, Lord Nott,” Narcissa says quietly, standing behind her desk. “And Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Listen to your own power,” she says. In the cold, white light of the snow and grey sky, she seems to glow.

“Got it.” Harry turns and begins to vanish into the wall, slowly disassembling. Narcissa watches it happen with a blank, curious expression.

“This kind of travel is very dangerous,” she says.

“Do you know what kind of travel it is?”

“Entire magical metamorphosis of being,” she says, because of course she knows. “It has been said that particular Lord Blacks are able to do it inside particular properties. I suppose that for a Mage, with Hogwarts being so steeped in magical atmosphere, it would be harder not to travel this way. But you should know it is generally only limited to the castle walls. Beyond it, he might lose a limb.”

“Thank you, he keeps dislocating his shoulder.” Theo lingers, his hand on the door knob. “Did you know? About my mother’s murder?”

“No.” Narcissa’s eyes are flinty. “I am unsurprised.”

“Yes,” Theo nods. “Did you know about my Aunt?”

“Last summer, when Severus began looking for his heir, he implicated that you were not under a kind hand. I did not know before then,” she pauses. “I do not know how the Minister knew. I doubt Severus told him and I did not. It is possible, though, that the Dark Lord ... intuited it.”

“It is?”

She nods.

“He has always had a talent for seeking out the vulnerable. The powerful. He encourages his followers to create such environments were ... well. It is to say, it is a surprise to me that only cousin Sirius ever became an Obscurus.” She looks down at the Nott ring, touching it with one delicate finger. “She adored the setting of this ring.”

“I remember,” Theo smiles.

“She wore no others, she was so enamoured with it. I will think of her always now.” Narcissa looks up at him, her eyes chips of blue sea glass, full of an honesty he wasn’t expecting. “I am glad you did not give up on the magic of your house. You have much to offer Lord Nott, to us all. I am proud to be of the House of Nott in this way.”

Theo wants to say something about how glad he is too, how grateful he is for the books and the letters and everything that has passed between them in these short seven months, but is struggling for the words. Eventually, catching her slightly raised silvery eyebrows, he settles on the blessing his mother said was native to old English Scryers.

“May your glass be as the waxing moon, revelation unbound,” he says.

“May your *odr* flame and your blades be sharp, Son of War,” she replies inclining her head. She always knows the right thing to say to him. He wonders, suddenly, how much of it is knowledge she learned from his mother and how much of it she sought out, reading ancient Norse texts to know him better. There is something strange happening inside his chest, something he has not felt in the presence of an adult for a long, long time. Theo stands still in

the truth of this feeling, of being known and seen in a way he never anticipated by someone he couldn't possibly expect.

"Thank you, Professor Malfoy," he says, and then closes the door behind him. He moves past the line of first years waiting to go into their Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson, many of them instantly falling silent as he passes because he's taught a few of them potions. A few pipe up:

"Do we have to call you Lord Professor Nott now, sir?"

"Don't be foolish, Professors have Masteries," he says. "Lord Nott is fine."

They all 'ooooh' and a few of them nudge their friends and he tries not to chuckle to himself as he trots down the stairs, pulling out his cupcake to take a bite. At the bottom of them, he sees a figure leaning against the wall, as if waiting for someone. He is less surprised than perhaps he should be to see Rosier.

"Theodore," Rosier smiles politely, stepping aside as if he merely is letting Theo pass rather than he has been waiting here, first for the Minister of Magic and then for Theo. Perhaps he was even told to stay behind, to flirt, to be compelling. Theo knows what Lucius Malfoy does not; Rosier is coming for Malfoy's position and he will not settle for the role of seducer.

"Consulting with the Minister's wife, I see?"

"I am teaching first year potions for Professor Malfoy," Theo says, brushing crumbs from his lips. "Forgive me, Felix, I have preparations to make."

"And cake to enjoy, of course, of course," Rosier's smile never moves. "So many preparations before the House of Nott falls. I shall be glad to see it."

It is the deftness of the insult, delivered so patiently and prettily, that makes Theo smile. Tremblay and Draco are of a different class of enemy, brash and argumentative. Rosier is the opposite. *Expressed interest in-fucking-deed. Expressed interest in marrying me so he can stab me through the fucking heart.*

"Of course you shall," Theo says, walking away from him. "And when the House of Rosier burns, I shall gladly watch."

"Be careful, Lord Nott," Rosier calls softly. "*Qui vivra verra.*"

He who lives, shall see.

"Yes, I will," Theo mutters, feeling Rosier's eyes on his back until he is out of sight.

"I, Nathaniel Fitz-Tremblay do hereby petition Lord Nott for his wardship –,"

"No, you cannot use that name," Blaise corrects Fitz, standing between them as Theo and Fitz stand opposite one another in the hot heat of Sahara's favourite greenhouse. The snake in question, is wrapped happily around Fitz neck, as if she has declared him already sworn. "As

you are petitioning Lord Nott as a bastard son of no House, you cannot make the verbal petition with your father's name."

"Right, sorry," Fitz swallows nervously.

"Do you need assistance with the words?" Theo asks.

"No, Lord Nott, I have learned them," Fitz's voice is firm and eager. He takes a deep breath and begins again. "I, Nathaniel Cornelius Davydova, do hereby petition Lord Nott for his wardship. I declare that I am a son without House, that I am a child of no name and I wish for the protection and guidance of the House of Nott. I pledge to follow his Lordship, to honour his treaties, to raise and bear wands with him and carry his arms, if he will accept my wardship."

"Good," Blaise nods and turns to Theo. "Lord Nott?"

"I, Lord Theodore Asger Skuld Nott, do accept the petition of Nathaniel Davydova for the wardship of my house. I accept that he is a son without house and a child of no name and will protect and guide him within the House of Nott. I will shelter him with my wand and name and arms, to the best of my ability as Lord of the House of Nott. I accept into my House this Ward Nathaniel."

Theo extends his hand for Fitz to shake. He's surprised when he feels a tingle of magic through his Lordship ring, warm and gold, and realises that somewhere, hidden in the crowded leaves and under his invisibility cloak, Harry has sent some of his own magic to chase their new agreement. Blaise smiles, as if he knows what Harry is doing, and sets his wand tip to Theo and Nathaniel's joined hands.

"*Ne sono testimone*," Blaise says, and a gentle warmth floods their shared fingers. "So mote it be."

"So that's it? It's done?" Fitz says, frowning at his and Theo's handshake which, unlike any of Harry's bondings, is completely ordinary.

"Yes," Theo says. They have said the appropriate wards for a young wixen seeking their own wardship rather than having a wardship decided by a parents, they have signed the appropriate papers and now they have shaken hands. "You are my ward now."

"Congratulations, Fitz-Tremblay," Blaise smiles. "Or will you be taking the Nott name at school now?"

"I mean ... could I?" Fitz looks at Theo furtively.

"Of course," Theo nods. It will be strange, having another Nott at school but it won't be unpleasant. "We may want to consider the timing of this news, however, and when you want your brother to find out about it. Because he will."

Theo can imagine that Cornelius Tremblay, recent graduate and new Death Eater, will be fucking outraged.

“I’ll wait, I’ll stay Fitz-Tremblay until I’ve talked to my Mum about it properly, but ...” Fitz frowns thoughtfully and then looks up furtively at Theo. “But ... what do you call me?”

“There are a few options,” Theo says evenly. He’s spent a lot of time looking into this ancient wardship claiming right that dates back to the 15th Century. “I cannot legally call you by your father’s name any longer, because it will denounce the vows. I can call you Davydova or Ward Nott or even just Fitz, if it suits you.”

“Or you could call me Nathaniel,” he says quietly. “Or Nate, like my friends do.”

Blaise and Theo shoot one another a look. It’s not a step they were expecting Fitz to make.

“Would you like us, and those in our acquaintance to use the intimacy of your first name?” Blaise asks quietly. “Or just Lord Nott?”

“Do you mean Harry and Heir Greengrass?”

“Yes,” Theo nods, because extending it to the various Gryffindors seems like it would cause a young Slytherin more harm than good. “Do you want that?”

“Yes,” Nathaniel breaks into a smile. “I don’t like being called Fitz, really, it’s like being called bastard all the fucking time. Nathaniel or Nate is better, and maybe after Yule I’ll be a Nott, I’ll see. I don’t have to call you by your first names, though. That would be ...” he shoots a slightly awed look at Blaise. “Weird.”

“That’s fine, but because of the magic of the wardship, you can’t call him Nott anymore,” Blaise says.

“What do I call you then?” Nathaniel frowns.

“There are only two appropriate forms of address between us now,” Theo hesitates. “Lord Nott or ... you may call me Theodore.”

Nathaniel’s eyes widen.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Theo nods. He doesn’t want Nathaniel in a position where he is having to call Theo by his title and besides, he wants to give the impression to the other Slytherins that joining their faction is a positive thing. A first name intimacy between a Lord and Ward might be appealing compared to the hierarchal nightmare that is the ranks of the Death Eaters. “To be clear, I am not only your Lord simply on paper and in vow. I am your Lord in deed. That means when you are in trouble in the castle, you will come to me. When you require help beyond your own capacity in the wixen world, when you need advice, when you need shelter, you come to me. When you are at home and under the care of your mother, I am still your Lord. Our families are connected now. If you have need of me or she has need of my political influence, I will be available. To help you or ...” Theo hesitates, not wanting to share too many of his ward’s secrets with Blaise. “Your sister.”

“Cool!” Nathaniel grins even wider. “Yeah! I ... um, thanks, Nott! I mean, Theodore. I’d like to do that.”

“Excellent!” Blaise folds the documents carefully and slips them inside his robes. “Then we are completed. You best hurry to your next class, Nathaniel.”

“Yep!” Nathaniel smiles and gently sets Sahara onto the soft moss underfoot. She slithers away, no doubt look for Harry and Nathaniel throws Theo an unexpectedly roguish look. “Does this mean you’ll give me special treatment when you help Professor Malfoy teach Potions?”

“Not even slightly,” Theo says. “Go.”

Nathaniel laughs and leaves. Blaise smiles at him broadly and then oddly, inclines his head, the way he might do when meeting a foreign dignitary.

“What in Odin’s name are you doing?” Theo says.

“You are well met indeed, Lord Nott,” Blaise pushes his shoulder. “You have been a long time in coming. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Theo is quietly touched.

“You, of course, have been well known since I met you, Heir Zabini,” he replies. Blaise shrugs lightly.

“Some of us are quicker than others. See you later.” Blaise raises his voice as he exits. “Until later, milord!”

“Don’t call me that!” A muffled voice calls back, unfolding himself out of invisibility. Harry is climbing down out of a tree, Sahara around his neck. For a second, Theo’s breath catches to look at him, scruffy in his uniform, a snake the colour of his eyes draped around him as he drops gracefully and easily five feet down onto the moss below.

“How did you get up there?”

“Climbed it,” Harry shrugs. “Climbed a lot of trees to get away from Ripper.”

“Ripper?”

“Just the worst dog in the world.”

And here I thought that was your former godfather.

“So that was weird, your wardship vows,” Harry says with a frown. “It was like, really intense and sounded very olden times. You didn’t swear that to Lord Greengrass, did you?”

“No, but that is because I was an heir to a noble house,” Theo brushes tree moss off Harry’s shirt. “These wardship vows are ancient. They are for bastards, as a way for a Lords to take children into their houses. I don’t know the last time a vow like this was sworn.”

“Ha! Excellent,” Harry puts his hands in his pockets and looks very smug.

“What?”

“Just hilarious to hear someone saying that about something I *didn't* do,” Harry grins and brushes his nose against Theo’s and whispers in a sing-song voice. “I’m not the only magically unparalleled one in the Greenhouse, ha ha de ha ha.”

“Shut up,” Theo pushes his face away with his hand, but secretly feels utterly delighted. Harry shakes him off with a grin.

“So Fitz, no, *Nate*,” Harry corrects himself, “his Dad is a right wanker who fucked his mum over?”

“Yes, because his twin sister is a squib,” Theo says. “Lord Tremblay had two bastard sons and no living legitimate children. He chose to legitimise his bastard Cornelius and to cast off Nathaniel and his twin sister.”

“Wow, an extra level of wanker then,” Harry wrinkles his nose. “Are you going to tell him about us? I mean he’s sort of like your ... brother? Or a weird cousin a million times removed?”

“The weird cousin is more appropriate since a ward is not a blood family member,” Theo smiles drily. “No, I will not tell him. I don’t want to put him in danger. He does not have ... adequate defences to guard that kind of information.”

“Well, he can wait I guess,” Harry sighs and wraps his arms around Theo, pressing his cheek to his chest, wanting to be held. “Eventually, if we like, y’know, live through this shit, everyone will know.”

Theo strokes his head and wonders if this is part of Harry’s reticence surrounding their fifth courting gift. Could it be that as they progress through the courting traditions of pureblood society, he worries about the public impact of such an announcement? After all, Harry has spend a lot of time dodging the public eye, particularly when it comes to his relationships. An eventual revelation that Lord Nott is courting Lord Black and the Potter Lord Apparent (even if at this moment it seems almost impossible to imagine the future where it is possible) will certainly cause a stir.

“Are you ... worried about what the press will say if that happens?” He asks anxiously.

“No, I know exactly what they’ll say,” Harry huffs into his chest. Sahara slides up to drape around Theo’s shoulders, her tongue flickering against his neck. “Christ on a broom, it’ll be a fucking wet dream for Skeeter.”

“Harry, no,” Theo winces at that unfortunate sequence of words.

“Well, I suppose she could die,” Harry looks up at him hopefully. “There’s going to be a war. You never know.”

“You wish death on Rita Skeeter?”

“Not like Voldemort, obviously, though she might deserve it,” Harry rolls his eyes. “But, like, she could trip over and fall in front of a Death Eater spell get stunned and then fall in a lake...”

“That’s oddly specific.” Theo kisses his nose. “If there’s ever the occasion for that to happen, I’ll make sure to help her trip over her own robes.”

“Thanks, Lord Nott, I appreciate that.”

There’s something about Harry calling him Lord Nott, joking with him so softly whilst they are bound together by the dry but steady scales of a serpent flickering with green magic, that makes desire surge through Theo like a lightening bolt. He can’t stop himself from gripping handfuls of Harry’s hair, kissing him wildly, even as Harry lets out a surprised little sound and is gripping the back of Theo’s robes firmly. The blood magic flows between them as their bodies fit perfectly together, the way they always do, and memories flow between them:

Theo sees his own memory, Malfoy’s face full of false earnestness:

“You yearned for Zabini? There are better, more powerful matches to be made, you could have a man more powerful than you have ever dreamed of. The House of Rosier has expressed interest ...”

Then it changes, and Harry is looking down on his sleeping face, stroking the lines of his face as if mapping them, trying to remember them. Harry brushes his fingers through Theo’s hair and leaves tiny traces of gold magic. Inside his mind, Theo hears Harry’s own voice, his thoughts as he gently asks Theo to wake up through the bond. Then he hears another thought, one he didn’t hear in the bond.

“I want to give you one last perfect day, Theo, that’s what you deserve.”

“Harry,” Theo pulls away, gasping, not realising that he has pressed Harry up against the tree, his green eyes hazy and glassy. “What ... what do you mean? One last perfect day? Is ... is this about what you read in Lord Gaunt’s journal?”

“What?” Harry shakes his head, as if trying to come back to himself. “Wait, what the fuck? Tom wants to marry you off to *Rosier*?”

“It doesn’t matter –,”

“It matters to me!”

“It was a lure, Harry, nothing more, the Dark Lord and Minister Malfoy have likely not considered the fact that Felix Rosier and I have hated one another our whole lives,” Theo strokes Harry’s face.

“I know, I just don’t like Tom thinking about you that way,” Harry’s eyes are dark with possessiveness and Theo tries very hard not to be distracted from his questions.

“What did you mean when you said I deserved a perfect day?”

“It’s your birthday, it’s the last day before I leave,” Harry rubs his thumbs against Theo’s throat. “Y’know, making sure our last day at Hogwarts together counts and stuff. Just nice things, Theo. I’m allowed to have secrets on your birthday!”

Theo stares at him. He knows now when Harry is lying, but Harry isn’t lying here, Theo can tell. However, Harry is an expert in not telling the precise truth. It’s a skill that’s only been honed in the time Theo’s known him, a natural aptitude from years of covering up his abuse honed into an automatic response by a wily house elf and a father who is a spy. If Theo knows the right question to ask, he will get the truth from Harry. The trouble is, he does not know what the question is and Harry’s eyes are lighthearted, his expression does not match the wistful and melancholy tone of his thoughts from the memory.

“It’s a birthday secret?”

“There are so many birthday secrets. I have to go, I’m supposed to be in a study session with Ron,” Harry kisses him quickly and ducks under his arm, letting Sahara rest around Theo’s shoulders. He walks towards the greenhouse door, grinning at Theo. “All I can say is ... come to the Room of Requirement. Six o’clock tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” Theo smiles tightly and presses words through the bond. *I love you, Potter.* Harry rolls his beautiful eyes and gives him a wink.

“You too, Nott,” he smiles, and ducks out of the Greenhouse. Theo’s smile drops. He said he would wait until the end of the day but the day has been long already, and if Harry has some kind of secret surprise meeting planned tonight, that’s more time he will have to wait. That soft, regretful tone in Harry’s memory means something and Theo isn’t going to wait until he’s been Lord Nott for an entire day to find out. He slowly reaches into his robes and pulls out the Dark Lord’s journal. He should be preparing for a first year lesson he is teaching at the end of the day with Narcissa, but instead he sits down with his pen and his parseltongue dictionary, staring at the strange script. He knows the question he needs, the question he has to ask Harry to get the answer he needs, is hidden inside here. He looks at what he’s managed to translate, starting at the end of the paragraph since it seems to be there that Harry stopped and left. So far the words are: *Yet for a horcrux as picked vessel that Mine end.* Theo stares at the word before ‘mine end.’ It looks like the word for ‘seen’ but it doesn’t seem like it makes sense in the sentence. He looks down at Sahara doubtfully as she hisses melodically at him. He doesn’t know why, but he feels like she wants to help.

“Sahara?” He strokes her head. “This word, I know you can’t read it, but ... it looks like the word for seen, but it’s not seen ...”

Sahara blinks at him and not for the first time, Theo wishes that she could talk to him like she talks to Harry. She hisses slowly, short and low, and Theo thinks he recognises it from the time after Harry went to the ministry, when he talked to Sahara about the Hall of Prophecy.

“Sahara, is the word for prophecy also seen?” Theo flips through the parseltongue dictionary, looking for the word for Prophecy. He hasn’t been able to get through most of the words that Willow Peverell Gaunt wrote, but he has at least worked out where the different letter sections begin. In the ‘P’ section he finds it, the word for ‘seen’ written a second time.

“It’s prophesy,” he whispers. “Yet for a something horcrux as picked vessel, or a picked vessel that prophesy mine end ...”

Theo stops. *Prophesy. A vessel. The Dark Lord’s end.* The Dark Lord only knew of one person in the world who was prophesied to be his doom, Theo only knows of one person, since Albus Dumbledore is so intent on always telling Harry.

“No,” Theo whispers. “It can’t be.”

He looks at the missing word, the word that will make it all make sense. He flicks through pages of the dictionary and finds it in the ‘H’ section. He’s worked out, vaguely, what sounds some of the script notations mean, finding it to be vaguely reminiscent of the hissing sibilant sounds in Russian. He tests it on his tongue, feeling rough and foolish but Sahara perks up. She rears slightly, staring directly into his eyes and hisses back to him, the sound clearer and more obvious on her tongue. Theo recognises it instantly. After all, she uses it all the time with Harry. It’s one of the first words he learned to audibly recognise. With a trembling hand, he fills the space next to the parseltongue word in the dictionary: *Hatchling*. He stares at the words in Tom Riddle’s journal and translates them, feeling his heart thundering. This is why Harry left and went to the Astronomy tower. This is why he came so close to hurting himself and needed to be saved by Snape. This is why he spent most of the night in the Black Castle talking to his guardians and his steward about how to use the Dark Lord’s horcruxes against him. The words that the Dark Lord wrote all those years ago sit on the page, so full of dread and terror, rocking Theo’s present:

Yet for a hatchling horcrux I picked a vessel that prophesied mine end.

Theo knows what question he needs to ask Harry.

End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: @elphreads

Twitter: @EmmaLouisePH

Website: emmahinds.com

Join the discord by adding elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!