

The Heir to the House of Prince Part 2 - The rise of the Black Prince

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The Heir to the House of Prince Part 2 - The rise of the Black Prince

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Summary

Harry dreams.

Beyond the veil, he realises that there is no taste to the air. He stands with the Black Prince and watches the ravens fly in slow circles above a triangle made of shadows.

"I'm dreaming," Harry says.

"You may be," the Black Prince smiles at him.

"Are you?" Harry asks. "Dreaming?"

"It's possible," the Black Prince watches the ravens with soft familiarity. "This is the place where we meet."

Then Sirius' arms are around him. Warm, strong, loving, hugging him from behind with that smell of cigarettes and whisky. "You're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry."

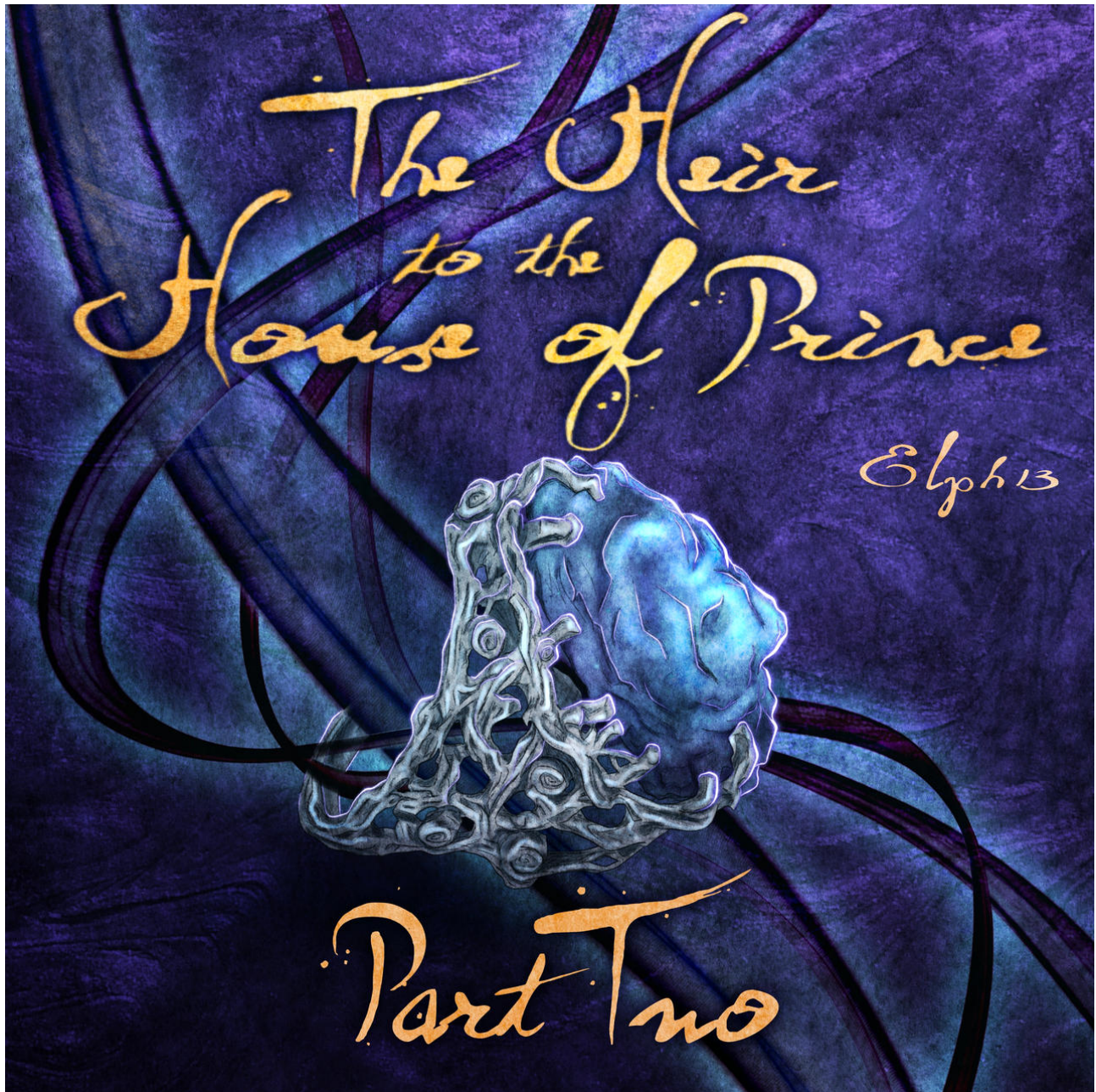
Harry turns with a smile to hug his godfather but Sirius is not there. Bellatrix is leaning over him and Harry is encased in stone, unable to breathe, unable to think through the pain in his hand.

"I expected more."

Harry screams and wakes, but not for long.

The dreams pull him back.

Prologue



Prologue.

Cornwall, 560AD

“MERLIN!” Morgana’s voice echoes up the stone stairs, jolting Merlin out of sleep. “Where are you?”

“Here!” Merlin groans, dragging himself up from the tatty, straw-stuffed bed on the floor of the draughty, tumbling folly that they’ve been living in. Merlin glances around their battered bedroom which is also their laboratory and their library and notices Morgana’s side of the bed is cold. She must have stayed out all night. “Up here!”

“Come on, you lazy shit!” The door, which is barely holding onto its hinges, slams open and Morgana is there, green eyes blazing and black hair flying, but she is not alone. Another woman, with dirty blonde hair and a grubby blue tunic over brown breeches, is with her.

“Belenus above, Morgan!” Merlin swears, dragging the covers off the bed to cover his naked body. “Who the fuck is this?”

“What, this?” Morgana folds her arms and looks down at Merlin, her shabby, dark red robe filthy at the hem. She jerks her head towards the blonde-haired blue-eyed girl standing in the doorway, a vague but curious expression on her face. “That’s Nimue.”

“And who the fuck is Nimue?” Merlin snarls. “And why is she in my bedroom?”

“Our bedroom,” Morgana corrects, whipping the tattered quilt away from Merlin’s naked body so he swears again, grabbing his breeches and pulling them on, trying not to flush at the way Nimue tilts her head to look at him, blue eyes sparkling with interest as they flitter over his dark skin. “And Nimue is here to help you with that unruly magic of yours.”

“Oh yeah?” Merlin raises his eyebrows, lifts a hand and thinks: *Come* to his robe and it drops over his shoulders.

“Fucking show off,” Morgana mutters, rolling her eyes. She hates that he can cast wandlessly and wordlessly.

“So what has she got?” Merlin taunts, standing up slowly, looking the slight, golden-haired thing up and down. She doesn't look like she has got anything.

“She’s got power,” Morgana snaps, her green eyes flashing and she hisses a spell, whipping out her wand and pointing it at Nimue. An invisible sword shimmers into being inside a scabbard and Nimue’s side. “And a magic sword that she says is for you.”

“For me?” Merlin stares at the sword. “What am I going to do with a sword that I can’t do with this?”

Casually, he throws a hand towards the window and a blast of silvery magic creates an arrow, flying through the air piercing the trunk of a tree outside. Unfortunately, he hasn’t quite got a handle on how to stop the magic and a cascade of silver arrows fall across the room. Morgana snorts.

“At least the sword won’t ruin our bedroom,” Morgana rolls her eyes.

“I don’t need a sword!”

“The sword is not for you,” Nimue says. She speaks softly but clearly, her eyes shimmering blue. “We only bear it until they come.”

Merlin stares at Morgana, eyebrows raised. “Seer, is she?”

“Undetermined,” Morgana says, breezily.

“We don’t need a Seer,” Merlin protests, gesturing to the rune circle that Morgana drew just the other day, animal blood peppered on the floor. “We have you.”

"Casting runes is not the same as Seeing!" Morgana snaps.

"It has the same effect!"

“I am not only a Seer,” Nimue says abruptly, stepping forward. She takes Merlin’s hand.

“What the —?” Merlin stares down at his hand. There are green leaves sprouting under the surface of his skin as if someone has tattooed him with seaweed ink. He looks up into Nimue’s face, sees the green in her eyes and the raised vines and leaves under her cheeks like her blood is filled with sap. *Holy Belenus above*. He feels a disconcerting trickle of excitement crawling up his spine.

“You’re Fae,” he whispers. He stares at Morgana who is grinning at him, green eyes glittering with satisfaction. “She’s Fae!”

"She's not just fae," Morgana says, "don't panic!"

"Mordred is hunting Wixen and Fae up and down the bloody country and Uther is letting him and you say don't panic?" Merlin shouts. He and Morgana have been on the run for weeks, ever since he accidentally blew up Uther's hallway at Camelot.

"Because you always panic!" Morgana rolls her eyes. "And she's not just fae."

“I am not just fae.” Merlin feels the whisper of a thousand voices against his ears as Nimue breathes out the words. He raises his eyebrows. He only usually feels this around powerful magical objects, magic whispering to him of their secrets. “I am of Earth and Wind and Water and Flame. I come from Oldest and Deepest. I am the third that you need.” Nimue says, withdrawing her hand and suddenly Merlin’s skin is normal again. “And I know what you are.”

Merlin swallows hard. The Elements are the Gods of the fae, he has no notion of what Oldest and Deepest could be. He glances at Morgana who shrugs carelessly. She does not care for Gods. She has always said that if she ever meets one, she will simply slay them. Merlin wishes he had her confidence.

“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, then her eyes settle back on Merlin. “You are something else.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Morgana leaning forward, expectation etched onto her face. Merlin recalls Morgana’s question the first time that they met in the bar in Wales. What the fuck are you? It’s the question Merlin has been asking all his life. He has never had an answer, just raw power bleeding from his fingertips and a lifetime of trouble.

“What am I?” Merlin asks, his throat dry.

“You are the Mage,” Nimue’s eyes glitter brightly. It is a word that means nothing to him, or by the looks of it, to Morgana, yet Merlin has that sense that he sometimes does of the portent of the

future. There is greediness in Nimue's eyes that Merlin doesn't understand, a darkness and a loyalty that smells like winter and tastes like honey. "You will bring justice. We will bring it together."

"You could be less elusive," Morgana says, eyebrows raised. Fae are notoriously secretive and Morgana notoriously finds it very, very annoying.

"Fae speak as we find," Nimue shrugs, speaking dreamily. "We cannot lie."

"Bollocks," Morgana snaps, rolling her wand indolently between her fingers. "Plenty of Fae have lied to me!"

"Fae cannot lie," Nimue's eyes flash golden for a moment. "We are secret keepers. We dissemble, but we never lie."

"Hence the riddles," Merlin mutters, looking sideways at Morgana who rolls her eyes. Morgana is much too impatient to love riddles. "Always so much to say and nothing to speak of."

"It is not what we have to say," Nimue says quietly. "It is what they have to say."

"They?" Merlin swallows heavily. "You mean ... the Elements?"

"All-powerful Gods," Morgana rolls her eyes sarcastically. "Great."

This is why Merlin has always been wary of Fae. Merlin remembers the hard hand of Uther's father, the way his word was law and his hand was heavy, and how exhausting it was to live each day under the oppression of the divine right of kings. Merlin does not want to live under divinity anymore.

"I won't serve them, I won't pray and I will not kneel to anyone, not even your Elements," Merlin blurts out and Morgana snorts with laughter, though her eyes are full of pride. It's the one thing they never argue about - how they will never bow before a throne again.

"I do not speak of the Elements," Nimue says calmly. "The Elements belong to the Fae. You are not Fae."

"Then what?" Morgana asks.

"I speak of that which the Elements belong to," Nimue says as if it is the most obvious thing in the world. "Oldest and Deepest."

"Oldest and Deepest what?" Morgana asks in confusion but Merlin says nothing, only staring at Nimue in shock because somehow, he recognises what she is saying. He understands the words, hears the name and knows the answer to Morgana's question.

"Magic," Merlin whispers. "She's talking about magic."

"Magic doesn't speak," Morgana frowns, bright green eyes flashing. "It is wielded or it is not, it is a tool, a force, a power."

"No." Nimue's voice in the sharpest Merlin has heard it so far in their very short acquaintance and the green leaves under her pale skin become more pronounced, the lime veins in them reaching up towards the surface. "No, wixen do not listen."

“Listen to what?” Morgana throws up her hands in frustration. “I thought you were going to teach him how to manage his power, this is absolute horse shit. We’re not fae, we don’t listen to the song of the trees, besides, magic isn’t like the Elements! It’s not like it has a voice!”

“Yes, it does,” Merlin answers without thinking. He knows it does because he has heard it. Morgana looks at him in utter surprise. Nimue grins, softly.

“You are the first of your kind but you will not be the last,” Nimue says. “You hear the voice of Oldest and Deepest. Listen.”

She tosses a sword at Merlin. He catches it on instinct, hand clasping around the beautiful, engraved hilt. Almost immediately, he feels the warmth of the magic inside it. He can hear it too, like a soft babble of voices buried under a deep, persistent ringing.

“Listen to it,” Nimue whispers, holding his gaze with her green and gold eyes that remind him of turning leaves. “Hear their voice.”

With Morgana looking at them both as if they are insane, Merlin closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to look at her sceptical eyes as he tries this. The noise of the sword’s magic is warm, it’s the only way he can think to describe it, hot and fierce, as if he is standing too close to a blaze.

“Ask it a question,” Nimue whispers and Merlin is nearly completely sure that the whisper comes not from Nimue’s lips but from inside his own head. He doesn’t have time to open his eyes and ask her what she means, however, because a different voice has formed inside his mind.

Who are you, Mage?

Merlin’s heart lurches when he hears that strange word that Nimue used. *Mage*. He wonders if that is who he truly is. Too strange for Wixen, too powerful for Fae.

I am Merlin, he replies, feeling burns forming on the palms of his hands. *Who are you?*

I am the giver, the voice in the sword is made up of a thousand whispers, of the sound of stones falling against one another. *I am Oldest and Deepest*.

What do you give? Merlin asks, nervously. He doesn’t understand the words of Oldest and Deepest but he believes that this sword and the magic inside it knows something. Merlin wants to know, too.

Power.

Merlin gasps for breath and opens his eyes, staring at Nimue. Merlin does not need more power, he knows he has more than enough, enough that his one childhood friend, Uther, has grown afraid of him. Enough power that Uther, who promised Merlin would always have a place by his side, has turned on him and called him and all Wixen and Fae like him “accursed.” Now Uther is King and what began as jealousy and fear have now become persecution and death as Mordred rides over the lands, sets himself up as The Dark One and marches with an army of the dead. Power has never made Merlin happy and the thought of more terrifies him. Nimue holds his gaze calmly, looking deeply unflustered by the terrifying sentience of the sword in his hand.

“Did it tell you that your robes are ugly?” Morgana asks lightly. Merlin doesn’t answer, he just stares at Nimue, looking for an answer to his panic.

"Do not be afraid, Mage." Nimue touches his arm and he instantly feels like he has been dipped into the deep coldness in the middle of the lakes. It is both chilling and calming. He takes a deep, stuttering breath. "There is great evil in the land."

"No shit," Morgana mutters.

"Power calls to power," Nimue whispers. "You do not wield and listen and learn alone. We shall help you."

"There's power in it?" Morgana's eyebrows raise. "Interesting."

"Ask it what it needs," Nimue says.

Merlin nods warily and looks at Morgana who is eyeing the sword with greedy excitement. Morgana doesn't care for or understand deities and Gods and deep magic, but she understands political power. She understands what she can touch and feel and cast. She can understand a sword that might change the country. She does not imagine that there is more. It is the more that scares Merlin. He closes his eyes, breathing deeply.

What do you need? Merlin asks the sword voice.

For you to be willing, the voice whispers.

Merlin feels the same way he does when Morgana casts runes, the same flicker of portent. He does not want more power but he does want to be free, and the weapon's magic feels so right in his hand.

I am.

Merlin gasps. There is more inside him than he ever thought possible, golden threads of magic from Oldest and Deepest weaving weft to the warp of his being. He doesn't know what it means but he knows how it feels: *like justice*.

"It is done," Nimue says, her voice both a promise and a gentle proclamation. She takes back the sword and Merlin watches as it dims from a glowing, fierce brand to an elegant but ordinary weapon as it sits in the scabbard at her hip.

"What's done?" Morgana asks. Merlin shakes his head, he cannot speak. He is breathing too heavily and his magic feels like thunder in his veins.

"The Mage has chosen," Nimue smiles. "Now we are three. Together, we shall bring justice."

"Justice," Morgana smiles. "I like the sound of that."

Merlin holds out a shaking hand and sees the gold light under his skin. He feels a new weight settling on his shoulders, the weight of suddenly being expected to be the one who knows, the one who can provide the answers. He feels as if the web of fate is closing tight around his spirit and there is no way out. For a moment, he sees flickers of other people, a dark-haired man a child he made by hand with golden eyes, a boy with a snake, glowing runes and a dog made of shadows at his feet. For a moment, Merlin feels he is beyond himself, that something is in progress he cannot stop.

There is no way out of your destiny, Mage.

Harry wakes abruptly, turns in his sleep, and feels Sahara's dry skin pressed against his neck.

"That was a weird dream," he hisses sleepily. "Did you know those people?"

"A part of me has always known them."

Harry wonders why Sahara is dreaming of them, and why he is sharing them, but he is too tired to think of it.

"That was Merlin," Harry yawns. "The first Mage."

"Go to sleep, Greenheart."

Harry does. When he dreams, it is of three burning points in a triangle, two of them doused and smouldering and one alight. He hears distant words inside his head: *Now we are three.*

Then the nightmares begin again.

Brewing secrets

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (PTSD/Depression)

HAPPY PRIDE! Keep it Queer, folks.

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

Severus is woken by a scream. He jerks awake against Lupin's bare chest, cheek slightly sticky against sweaty skin and whips his wand out from under his pillow. He can see nothing in the dark but feels Lupin scrambling towards the doors, of course, his werewolf senses are heightened in the dark.

"Harry," the wolf mumbles hoarsely and Severus groans, tapping his wand against the bedside light, squinting just in time to see Lupin wrenching open the bedroom door and padding away down the hall. Harrison has been screaming three or four times a night, needing to be woken out of night terrors and have his wounds checked from where he thrashes violently in the bed for the last seven days. He and Lupin have been taking it in turns. Severus sighs and slumps against the headrest as he hears Lupin opening Harrison's door. He feels himself start to drift back to sleep. Maybe he can get an hour in before Harrison wakes again and it's his turn.

"Sev!"

Lupin's voice is unusually urgent. Severus bolts up, grabbing his black dressing gown and wrapping it around his shoulders as he hurries out. Kreacher is standing in the hallway, rubbing his bulbous eyes with knobbly fists.

"Master is awake," he grumbles. "Magic is awake."

Severus doesn't stop to ponder that but rushes into Harrison's bedroom, straight into Lupin's back. The wolf is standing in the middle of the room, staring at the child's bed. The boy is twisting in the sheets, which is not unusual, but he is wreathed in bright, white magic, swirling around him. The Black magic.

"Shit," Severus curses.

"I don't ...," Lupin looks helplessly at Severus. "Can I move through it? Will it harm me?"

"It might," Severus remembers how, on the night Harrison died in Grimmauld Place, Severus had to use the Prince magic to traverse through a Black shield. It had stung his bare skin. The wolf is only wearing a loose pair of Severus' pyjama trousers. Severus places a hand on Lupin's bare shoulder. "Let me."

Severus approaches carefully, just as Harrison twists and screams again, screams as if he has been stabbed and the white light pulses away from him, icy cold. Severus feels the tether of the Prince magic around his wrist and sees it around Harrison's wrist. It has not weakened or lessened in the week they have all been together in Skye. If anything, Severus feels as if it is stronger. So he confidently thinks of it, fixes his eyes on his son's tether and a dark shadowy rope appears between their wrists. Severus knows Lupin cannot see it but Severus reaches out and fixes his hand on it, tugging gently. *I am here, Harrison. Let me help you.* He feels a tugging in the tethering, the dark rope shortening and pulling him through the white, swirling shell of the Black Magic. It feels like the fierce freeze of a snowstorm, so sudden and vicious it sucks his breath and freezes his eyebrows. He thinks he even sees wings fluttering by. Then he reaches the bed, sits beside his son on sheets that are somehow miraculously, boiling hot and sweat-drenched, and squeezes Harrison's right hand. He lifts his other hand, freezing cold, and presses it against Harrison's burning forehead and bleeding scar.

"*Farzandam*," he says firmly. "Wake up."

He does not expect it to work but Harrison's eyes open. For a second, they are completely black, and the whites of his eyes vanished under a dark cloud. It is terrifying. Severus almost reels back in shock but he is too cold to move. He does not know where his son is, where his beautiful green eyes have gone, but he needs him to come back. Then he remembers, with a twist of horror, that his son has crossed the veil of Charon.

Holy fucking shitting Merlin.

"Come back, Harrison," Severus calls loudly, pressing his Prince ring against his child's heirship ring. He does not know what he is saying but if there is even the vaguest possibility that his child has crossed into a different realm, he will make sure he is brought back. "Back to this side, *farzandam*. Listen to my voice. Follow the tethers. Come back."

Remarkably, Harrison lets a long shuddering gasp and Severus sees the green pool back into his eyes, like coal being dusted off bright gemstones. The Black magic is drawn back into his skin as he breathes in and then he slumps. The air is no longer cold. Severus can get oxygen into his lungs with more ease and his eyelashes defrost as he sits on the bed. His son is blinking and shaking violently, curling up into the foetal position, gripping Severus' hand back so tightly that Severus worries he will break a finger.

"Harry? What hurts?" Lupin rushes to their side as soon as he can, clambering onto the bed and pulling Harrison's head into his lap.

"*She's cutting off my hand, she's going to cut me to pieces*," Harrison hisses. Severus feels it pass through their Prince rings, the parseltongue slithering into his mind. Severus sees into his memories so easily, as if his son's eyes are windows into the past. *Harrison is gasping for breath as Bellatrix's wand opens wounds on his naked chest, falling in and out of consciousness. He cannot move and Severus feels his fear, the terror that he will be utterly dismembered and not be able to do anything about it.*

"What is he saying?" Lupin asks.

"He thinks he's with Bellatrix," Severus mutters, trying to shake his son's horrible memories out of his mind.

“Harry, she’s not here, you got out, you survived,” Lupin presses his face against Harrison’s, rubbing his nose against Harrison’s cheek. “You’re here with me, with Severus, in Skye. The sea is just outside, you’re not underground, you’re with us.”

Harrison shudders and Severus feels a shaking hand grip him tight for a second before the child relaxes. He twists his face towards his godfather and breathes deeply as if taking in his scent like an animal.

“Moony?” Harrison croaks out. Severus is relieved his English has returned.

“Yes, Harry,” Lupin kisses the boy’s damp curls in relief. “You’re safe.”

“Safe,” Harrison murmurs, shifting slightly. “Move over, Padfoot.”

Severus catches Lupin’s eye and sees the spasm of grief. In dreams, Harrison often seems convinced that Black is with him in his dog form. He is long past correcting the child, but it is wearing on the wolf, who swallows hard. Severus leans forward, rubbing his thumb over the bloody red mark of the runes that splinter like tree roots up the inside of Harrison’s arms.

“Sleep, *farzandam*,” Severus murmurs. Harrison lets out a long sigh and, as if he has been commanded, relaxes against Lupin. Severus feels the tethering on his wrist tightening for a moment before it settles gently. Lupin shifts behind Harrison, lying beside him and rubbing the teenager's thin arm.

“He’s soaked through,” Lupin whispers, frowning at Harrison’s damp t-shirt. “He should change so he doesn’t catch a cold.”

“Kreacher will do it,” the elf whispers.

Severus turns, he hadn’t even realised that Kreacher was watching from the door. The elf clicks his fingers and Harrison’s sweaty shirt is swapped for a t-shirt that is too big for him. Theodore’s. However, it seems to calm Harrison, who breathes deeply and presses his back against Lupin’s chest.

“I’ll sleep here with him,” Lupin says quietly. “You can go back to bed, Severus, I’ll keep an eye.”

“Very well,” Severus says, sliding off the bed and standing, but Harrison still has hold of his hand. He finds he cannot bear to let go at this moment. He lowers himself to the hard floor beside Harrison’s bed, leaning his head against the edge of the pillow as it has slipped half off the bed. Kreacher climbs up by Harrison’s feet, his giant ears folded over his face and pulls a small blanket over his curled up form, like a cat. Severus stares at him.

“Kreacher is not leaving,” the elf snarls, keeping one large eye open and fixed on Severus as he sighs. He even sees the serpent slide in through the open window, dropping onto Harrison’s chest and curling up with a hiss. It seems they are all guarding Harrison tonight. Severus sighs heavily.

“Are you trapped?” Lupin whispers with a smirk over Harrison’s head.

“Resting only,” Severus mutters, closing his eyes and Lupin chuckles in the dark. This has been the rhythm of their life since they arrived. For all the times that Severus has mourned not being able to see his child grow up, for all the birthdays, the first times and the moments of precious infancy he has missed, he has not once mourned the sleepless nights of rearing a newborn and yet fate seems

determined he should experience it. He has not drunk this much coffee since he and Harrison were alone after Grimmauld Place. *Sweet Circe, I shall never have another child. I could not do this for twelve months.*

“I got an interesting letter today,” Lupin’s voice whispers over the soft sound of Harrison’s breathing.

“Fascinating,” Severus mutters. “From whom?”

The letters come every day. Severus has never been more glad that he wrapped the cottage up in a particular charm that obscures owls in flight to it for thirty miles in any direction. They’ve practically become an eyrie.

“You’ll never guess.”

“No, I shall not,” Severus says sharply, but Lupin only huffs with whispered laughter. Severus rolls his eyes at the wolf’s stupidity but cannot help but indulge him. Lupin’s laughter has been getting him through these long, tense nights. “Fine. I assume it was not Albus.”

“His letters aren’t what I’d call interesting,” Lupin snorts.

Albus writes almost daily with requests and comments, most of which they ignore. The other daily culprits are Weasley who writes on behalf of the goblin King and Shacklebolt who writes on behalf of the Order and Contessa Zabini who writes on behalf of herself to pressure Lupin to return to Venice with Harrison for both of their safety. Severus has been studiously avoiding giving an opinion on that since he knows it would be the most prudent course of action but he despises the idea of having Harrison out of his sight.

“Does the Contessa try to entice you to Venice with even more lavish apartments?” Severus says drily.

“No,” Lupin snorts. Harrison has begun to snore softly, thin chest rising and falling under Theodore’s borrowed t-shirt. “I heard from the Watchers Council.”

These are the letters that irk Severus the most. It seems the story of Harrison’s astounding Patronus in the Department of Mysteries has spread further than they wanted. Letters to Harrison from the Unspeakables, from Amelia Bones, from the Head of the Dangerous Magicks department, have all found their way to Skye. Unfortunately, it seems that the Unspeakables do not live up to their name because other covert magical protection agencies around the world have been in touch.

“Which Watcher?” Severus whispers back.

“A Doctor Giles?”

“Doctor Rupert Giles?” Severus glares.

“Yes.”

“You tell Ripper to get his own teenagers in line before he comes sniffing around mine,” Severus snarls in a whisper. *Wily fucking bastard.*

“I’ll do just that,” Lupin chuckles quietly. “Did you hear from Magnus?”

“Yes.” Bane is still in New York, fully recovered, and doing his best to negotiate any American interest in Harrison and the war. “He’ll hold off the Clave for us.”

“Good.” Lupin hesitates. “The headlines ...”

“I know.”

Lupin is keeping the papers away from Harrison but this technique has no longevity. Next week Harrison will be going to Rome with Lupin to sit his OWLS. The Daily Prophet has been speculating daily on their son’s status as the potential ‘Chosen One,’ despite Lucius’ position. Severus is unsure if the Dark Lord is just happy to maliciously encourage the Wixen public to heap responsibility upon a child (even a magically unparalleled one) or if the notion of the free press is actually ironically persisting, despite Lucius’ various bribes. Today’s headline had been particularly sharp-toothed: DUMBLEDORE’S PROPHECY CHILD. Severus took great pleasure in burning it, very slowly.

“Who told them?” Lupin whispers. “About the prophecy?”

“I doubt anyone did,” Severus sighs. “But the room of prophecy was destroyed, inferences could have been made.”

“Or Albus did it.”

“Your opinion of him has truly plummeted if you think he is feeding information to Rita Skeeter,” Severus whispers drily.

“My opinion plummeted after my child walked out of the Veil of Charon, endured a fight with Bellatrix and a possession by bloody Voldemort and Albus still had the nerve to turn his bloody wand upon him,” Lupin growls. Lupin has been more affected by this tidbit of the story delivered by a breathless Granger than Severus. Lupin has been nursing outrage ever since. Severus could barely muster the energy to be surprised by it.

“Shh!” Kreacher hisses. “Mopey wolf must not wake poorly Master. Kreacher will poison his chocolate.”

“Keep your little hands off my chocolate,” Lupin mutters.

“Then wolf will keep his mouth shut,” Kreacher snaps.

“Wolf is going to eat you one day,” Lupin mumbles. Severus tries not to smirk. When Lupin is very tired, he is wonderfully hilarious.

“Kreacher would like to see him try.”

Lupin’s growl reduces to a distracting rumble in his throat. Severus suddenly longs for their bed, to press his lips against the stubble there and fall asleep.

“Hush, or shall poison you both,” Severus says. “You shall not see it coming.”

Lupin’s grumble softens, as do Kreacher’s mutterings. They all listen to the boy’s breathing, to the whispering hiss of the snake.

“We need to keep Harry away from Albus,” Lupin whispers, once he can speak again without snarling. “With the headlines ...”

“Yes,” Severus sighs. The child is already fighting his way out of a pit of self-blame. If he has to endure Albus pressuring him to take up the mantle of boy-hero, he will likely explode. As much as Severus would delight in seeing Albus experience the full ferocity of Harrison’s magic it is something they cannot possibly permit to happen. Not until Harrison is more stable, at least. There are secrets that still must be guarded. *Mage. Necromancer.*

“So,” Severus can hear Lupin swallow heavily. “I should take him to Venice.”

Lupin’s voice is resigned but he hears the question inside it. The reluctance. Severus’ heart clenches in an echoing response. He feels it too, more than reluctance, downright aversion. They may be hounded by letters here but they are not traceable or findable. It might be exhausting sharing a tiny house with a homicidal house elf, a traumatised surly teenager, a werewolf who has a tendency to put Severus’ books back on the wrong shelf and a damned reptile, but Severus knows it is better than any alternative. Yet every day it gets harder to stay. This weekend the final NEWTS students left Hogwarts concluding their exams, Minerva had the sense to send home students home when they completed rather than waiting. Harrison’s friends have all made it safely to their respective summer locations. Consequently, Severus can feel the outside world pressing against the stone walls of the tiny cottage, can see the worry lines deepening in Lupin’s face and can see Harrison’s eyes drifting more and more frequently to the skyline. He can even feel his own sense of time running out and stretching, knowing that ten weeks of time unreachable will be harder and harder to justify to Lucius. His arm as the Minister for Magic has grown long enough to make Severus twitch.

“Let us see how Ireland goes,” Severus whispers. “Then decide.”

“Alright,” Lupin lies back down beside Harrison. “Go back to bed whilst you can, Severus.”

“Yes,” Severus says, but he cannot let go of the child’s hand. Not because he grips too hard, in fact, Harrison’s grip is slack in sleep, but because the idea of going back to his bed alone, of leaving Lupin and Harrison alone here unwatched and undefended, despite the deadly snake and the murderous house elf, is suddenly impossible. So Severus closes his eyes and listens to his child’s breath, to the wolf’s breath and reminds himself that they are all, miraculously, still alive.

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“What are you doing?”

Severus looks up from the nerve replenisher he is making in the kitchen. Harrison is leaning against the door to the living space, arms folded inside a mustard coloured patched jumper that Severus knows is Lupin’s. He looks exhausted. Severus is not surprised. They are all exhausted.

“Brewing,” Severus says, trying not to sound curt. Lupin had to return to Venice this morning for a gathering of the Congregation and this is Severus’ first opportunity to use the kitchen. He and

Harrison are due in Ireland tomorrow for Apollonius' pyre. The elf is protesting Severus' presence in his domestic dominion by cleaning Severus and Lupin's room and likely putting everything back in the wrong place as an act of petty revenge. Severus needs to work quickly, or he'll discover all of his socks have been transfigured into bearing the House of Black coat of arms. "Where is your reptile?"

The last Severus knew Harrison was lying on his bed and hissing to it quietly about Merlin knows what.

"Hunting," Harrison shrugs.

"Are you revising?" Severus asks. Severus and Remus have been guiding Harrison through his revision for his OWLS since his wounding and exhaustion are impacting his memory and stamina. That is even with Lupin creating a revision schedule that is uniquely suited to Harrison's Attention Deficit Disorder. His recovery has not been as linear as Severus had hoped.

"A bit," Harrison scowls. "It's annoying."

"It will be less annoying if you use a wand," Severus says.

"Maybe I don't want to do magic," Harrison scowls darkly. Severus tries not to roll his eyes. Harrison has developed an unhelpful aversion to wand magic. It makes sense, of course, that the child would be feeling ambivalent toward magic after experiencing it in such negative ways. Lupin says it is a natural trauma defence mechanism but Severus can't help his irritation since the child literally almost chilled Severus to death with magic without even realising it last night.

"Maybe you'll feel more amenable to it when you have your own wand back," Severus suggests. Theodore will return Harrison's wand tomorrow and Harrison can stop using Black's wand, which Severus will be grateful for. Just the sight of that wand makes him itch.

"Doubt it," Harrison grumbles. "What are you making?"

"A nerve replenisher."

"For you?" Harrison moves forward, hugging his arms against his body. He seems to always struggle to maintain a level body temperature now. Severus does not know if it is a consequence of magical exhaustion or the hypothermia, or perhaps that his child had an encounter with the veil of Charon, but he's been casting a lot of warming charms lately. "For after Tom?"

Severus nods. They have been in Skye for a week. The Dark Lord has called Severus twice for information about Albus which Severus has happily now been able to give again since Harrison negotiated Severus' return to the old man's favour. The Dark Lord has not asked after the location of Harrison, something that Severus finds endlessly disturbing after five years of nearly obsessive reports. Albus does not seem troubled, which is even more disturbing.

"Good," the boy nods back, staring at the cauldron thoughtfully. "His Cruciatus is a bitch."

"Language," Severus says lightly. Harrison has not told them exactly how many times he was under the Dark Lord's wand and Severus has not broached the subject of Harrison sharing the memories through occlumency, since Lupin thinks it is best if Harrison shares his experiences in his own words at his own time. Severus is in half a mind that Harrison is more likely to bury those

memories rather than deal with them, very much as Severus does. He remembers Harrison's words when he woke up in the Giardino. *I drowned my books.*

"Yeah, yeah," Harrison mutters, rolling his eyes. He steps up to the counter, eyes distant. Severus pauses and looks up at the child, sees the way his eyebrows are knitted together and he is chewing his lip. He woke three times after the Black magic erupted out of him in the night and after the last Kreacher had declared it was time for him to rise and so he would guard Harrison. Severus and Lupin had stumbled back into bed just before dawn and slept for a brief few hours before Lupin had to apparate to Venice. Severus and Lupin have agreed it is not beneficial for Harrison to be left alone to brood. It is much harder now that Lupin is not there to hug the child or take him to the beach. Severus hesitates.

"You may help me if you wish."

"Me?" Harrison raises his eyebrows. "Are you kidding?"

"You are not compelled to," Severus says. "Brewing can be a calming process."

"Yeah, if you're not in a classroom with -," Harrison bites off the words and his jaw tightens. Severus can easily finish the sentence and there is no need to. They both know what has stood between Harrison and being calmed by brewing. He knows he should not be surprised by the fact that there is genuine disquiet in his child's eyes. *If he fears the discipline, it can only be my fault.*

"We are not in the classroom now." Severus steps to the side of the cauldron and offers Harrison the birch stirring rod. "Come and be useful. Stir. I shall prepare the willow bark."

Harrison sighs and rolls his eyes. Severus tries not to give in to the flickering irritation inside him. Infuriating child. Severus has been counting backwards in various languages often this week. *On, dukuz, sekiz, yedi, alti ...*

"Of course, you could always sulk some more and actually do some revision," Severus drawls.

"Fine," Harrison takes hold of the rod hesitantly and stands beside him. Severus takes the opportunity to gently tap him on the shoulder with his wand, casting a soft warming charm. It is a sign of how much medical intervention Harrison has needed in the last three weeks that he does not even seem to notice. They brew quietly for a moment.

"There's willow bark in a nerve replenisher?" Harrison asks, eyeing the ingredients on the table.

"Yes," Severus sprinkles the bark into the pestle and mortar and begins to grind.

"Why does a nerve replenisher need an anticoagulant in it?" Harrison stirs slowly in a clockwise motion. "It has salicylic acid in it, right?"

"It does," Severus pauses. He has never known Harrison to have any knowledge of potion ingredients. "You know this how?"

"I accidentally took some aspirin in the summer, when I was bleeding. After Vernon." Harrison winces. Severus remembers the wounds across Harrison's back, the deep scars marbled silver. He feels a chill of disgust for that hideous man but he made Lupin swear not to murder the muggles so it would probably be bad form to do it himself. "Theo was mad."

“I can imagine that would be the case,” Severus says drily, thinking of how furiously Theodore has defended Harrison this year. The boys are in near-constant communication through their enchanted notebooks. Severus knows Harrison craves Theodore but is secretly thankful Theodore is not here. It is a very small house and Lupin struggles with the idea of Harrison and Theodore sharing a bedroom. Severus can only have the same fight so many times. “Salicin has other properties aside from blood thinning. It is a painkiller, hence its benefit in nerve replenishing potions.”

“I bet.”

Harrison is still tense, his eyes fixed on the potion in front of him. Severus wonders briefly, as he slowly adds powdered willow bark when Harrison reaches the nine o’clock point of the stir, what he can do to ease the stress.

“Why do you do it like that?” Harrison asks.

Harrison is looking at Severus’ hand curiously. Both of them are still wearing the tethering of the Prince magic on their wrists. Severus feels a twinge of fondness when he sees them. *Safe. I can always make him safe now.*

“Most of potions making is about rhythm,” Severus says quietly. “You have chosen a rhythm as you stir and I add the ingredients at rhythmic intervals.”

“I haven’t chosen a rhythm,” Harrison snorts.

“We are all rhythmic beings, you more than most,” Severus says wryly. The boy, despite his tremors and lethargy, still taps incessantly. His knees still jiggle, and his fingers still flicker. “Potioneers are more aware of it than other Wixen.”

“Huh,” Harrison grunts, but Severus can tell something in this discussion has captured his attention. The ice of his son’s irritation is beginning to thaw slightly. *Thank Merlin for that, I can only endure so much insolence.* “Is it a song?”

“It comes from your heartbeat, from your blood,” Severus says. “Yours is probably rapid. Your resting heart rate is quite high. Undoubtedly from a life of undue stress, your attention deficit disorder and an inordinate consumption of sugar.”

Severus raises his eyebrows significantly. Harrison has eaten a treacle tart every day since they arrived in Scotland. Lupin says they should let it be in favour of Harrison’s recovery. Severus cannot do so, it seems.

“Rude,” Harrison mutters, then purses his lips. “Is this fast then?”

Severus looks at Harrison’s stirring. It is actually not as rapid as he anticipated.

“Not overly,” he says. Harrison seems to consider this for a moment.

“Do you ever think it might be magic?” he says abruptly. “All magic has a song, all songs have a rhythm. Maybe the rhythm in potions comes from that.”

“All magic is a song?” Severus asks blankly.

“Yeah,” Harrison nods. “I can hear it.”

Severus stares at him, and almost misses the next moment to add powder. The ancient books of the Princes talk of the music of magic, as do the myths around Merlin, but Severus does not think anyone has spoken of magic as a song outside of metaphorical philosophical manuscripts. Dee might have written about it, but so much of his library has been lost. Severus is at sea, unable to anticipate this because no one anticipated a child that could traverse the veil of Charon. Severus makes a mental note to write to Bane. *The man may as well put his hundreds of years of life to good use, something other than seducing Blacks.*

“Do you always hear it?” Severus asks cautiously. Harrison shakes his head.

“No, not always. Sometimes. Always in the deep place.”

The deep place. Severus still has no idea how to understand this concept of a mental plane of existence where his child can apparently hear magic. This is how their life has been since Harrison woke up. Astonishing and overwhelming tidbits of information just dropped into conversation. Severus feels as if he is reading a book backwards.

“Will you tell me about the deep place?” He asks cautiously. Some days, Harrison speaks as freely as the day he did on the beach when they first arrived in Skye. Other days, he doesn’t speak at all, not even in parseltongue.

“Okay,” Harrison shrugs.

Severus waits but Harrison volunteers no more information. Severus wonders what he can ask since he has literally no concept of what the deep place could possibly be.

“You hear magic there?”

Harrison nods, looking down at the cauldron.

“Do you experience magic in any other ways?” Severus asks.

“Why does it matter?” Harrison grumbles. Severus can tell he is irritated. Severus is keeping calm. The child is clearly itching for some kind of fight. *Sweet Circe, Lupin had better return quickly.*

“Because the more we know and understand about your magic, the more we can help you survive,” Severus says simply. Harrison sighs, reaching a hand up to rub his inflamed scar. Severus gently tugs Harrison’s hand away. “Do not scratch.”

“It hurts,” Harrison mumbles.

“When we finish brewing, you can take some,” Severus says quietly.

“Okay,” Harrison sighs, slumping. Severus visibly sees the rage leech out of his child, as if the admission of being in pain is enough to suck the fight right out of him. This has been Harrison since they came to Skye. Whilst they were in the Giardino, Harrison seemed to have been disassociated from his trauma, in pain and weary but sleeping at night and relatively cheerful by day. Since the funeral, he thrashes in his trauma by night and tries to pretend it doesn’t happen by day. Lupin is unsurprised by this evolution of Harrison’s mood and behaviour. Severus recognises it painfully from the summer after Regulus died.

“I can smell it.”

“Smell what?”

“Magic,” Harrison swallows hard. Severus realises he is answering Severus’ earlier question. “I can see bonds sometimes, and make other people see them.”

“Like your bond with Theodore,” Severus says, thinking of how he came across Theodore and Harrison asleep in the Giardino, cocooned in blue and gold light looking the picture of contentment. When Severus had touched it, it had been like touching a live wire. In a week of extraordinary things, it was one of the most memorable.

“Yeah.”

“No other instances?”

“Not yet,” Harrison snorts mirthlessly.

Severus thinks slowly. He will have to consult Eileen’s books, but he does not think such levels of magic sensing have been recorded since rumours of Merlin, and of course, the Fae. It terrifies him slightly, but since Severus is so completely focused on just getting through the day with a maximum of seven cups of coffee and ensuring Harrison stays in one piece, it is a fear to be managed later.

“Thank you for explaining that to me,” Severus says quietly. Harrison twitches and grunts his assent, but Severus can tell by the way his shoulders relax that he is grateful.

“Y’know, potions is a bit like cooking,” Harrison says thoughtfully, watching as Severus adds the last of the willow bark powder. “There’s timing and rhythm in that too. I’ve done a lot of cooking.”

“You have?” Severus has never seen Harrison touch anything in any of the kitchens at any of their homes.

“For Petunia,” Harrison keeps stirring. Severus’ stomach clenches. It is so rare for Harrison to volunteer any information about his early childhood. Every tidbit Severus receives enrages him.

“For how long?” Severus asks softly. It’s very important that he keeps his voice level and does not draw attention to himself. Harrison will stop speaking if he becomes aware of how taut with fierce interest Severus is in this topic.

“Since I was about five, I think, I dunno,” Harrison’s eyes are fixed on the cauldron and Severus knows that concentrating on continuing to stir the potion is making Harrison less aware of Severus’ focus. “Mainly breakfast before school, full English for Dudley, lots of fried stuff, though I can make a really good lasagne.”

Severus thinks of the steps it takes to make a lasagne, of the dangers to a five-year-old. Boiling water, frying pans, a hot oven.

“How did you keep from injuring yourself?” Severus can’t stop himself from asking.

“I’m fast,” Harrison shrugs. “Good reflexes.”

“Or you had to be fast and developed good reflexes to keep from catastrophic injury,” Severus amends.

“Is that different?” Harrison asks. It is galling that the child cannot see the difference. Severus knows that pity or dismay is the worst thing he can possibly demonstrate right now. He struggles momentarily against the well of rage inside of him at Petunia and her hideous vindictiveness. Clearly, it had not been enough to hate her sister she had to torture her nephew too. He struggles once again to hold onto his own words to Lupin: *You will do nothing to them that Harrison does not want. It is his abuse. It is his to decide.* Still, Severus cannot help himself from at least giving voice to some of his outrages.

“One day, if you are ever ready, it will be possible to bring charges in the muggle world against her,” Severus says quietly.

“For making me cook?” Harrison looks up at him quizzically.

“Yes. For other things also.”

Harrison looks at him strangely for a second but then shrugs, turning away and Severus senses the strange type of mind magic that Harrison uses to care less about his past trauma draping up around him, relaxing his body and glazing his eyes slightly. Severus does not want the child to drift into disassociation. He tries to think of something to draw his attention.

“Your grandfather, your mother’s father, he enjoyed cooking,” Severus begins slowly. “Your grandmother, Mrs Evans, did most of the day to day cooking in their house but it wasn’t a love of hers. Mr Evans enjoyed cooking on the weekends. His food was very good.”

“You ate with them?” Harrison asks quietly.

“Yes,” Severus nods. He will be honest, if only because he is near desperate that the child is honest with him. “Like you, I did not receive adequate nourishment from my childhood caregivers.”

Harrison nods slowly.

“What did they cook?”

“Mrs Evans kept things the way she liked them as a child growing up in the city. Brummie bacon cakes were a favourite,” Severus smiles at the memory of hot, cheesy dough on his tongue. “Your grandfather’s parents were Korean, however. He liked to cook Seollangtang on Sundays. The local butcher would save the ox bone for him.”

“Wait, Mum was a Brummie?” Harrison stares up at Severus like he has grown an extra head. “And you too ... you’re from Birmingham?”

“What is that tone?” Severus snaps. “You have been to Spinner’s End, you know where it is.”

“You never let me outside the wards, it could have been on the moon, I wouldn’t know!” Harrison exclaims.

“I think you would,” Severus glares.

“This can’t ...” Harrison runs a hand through his hair. “You don’t sound like a Brummie!”

“That is by design,” Severus scowls. He worked long and hard to scrub any hints of Tobias’ Birmingham drawl away so he could rub shoulders easily with the Latin-speaking, London-based

Sacred twenty-eight. “Wixen may pretend they carry none of the prejudice of muggles, but Northern accents have been disdained in this land since the Romans.”

“Did my Mum have the accent?” Harrison sounds slightly panicked.

“Not really, Cokeworth is nearer Coventry than the city,” Severus frowns. “Why is this distressing you?”

“I don’t sound like her!” Harrison bursts out, his stirring rhythm increasing. “I’ve never even had Korean food, I’ve never been to Birmingham! Would people even think I was her son if she was alive?”

“Enough,” Severus holds his hand out for the stirring rod, directing Harrison towards the chopping board. “Calm down. Slice the turmeric.”

Harrison huffs and steps up to the board, slicing the turmeric very effectively as Severus takes over stirring. Severus believes that the boy has been cooking his whole life.

“Anyone who saw you and your mother side by side today could have no doubt of your parentage,” Severus says firmly.

“I had her eyes,” Harrison mutters glumly. Severus hears the unspoken words: *I don’t anymore.*

“You still do,” Severus says. “You have eyes of identical shape, if not shade. You have her ears and her lips.”

“I do?” Harrison says softly, pausing in chopping.

“Yes,” Severus nods.

“Magnus said I looked like you.”

“Magnus Bane never met Lily Evans,” Severus says tartly. “You may have my skin and my mother’s hair but when you are in a rage, you are the spit of your mother. I should know.”

Harrison snorts at that. Then he nods appreciatively and begins to chop again slowly.

“Are they dead?” He asks abruptly. “My grandparents?”

“Yes,” Severus says. He sees no cause to sugarcoat it. “Mrs Evans died in 1979, and Mr Evans died in 1981.”

The two worst years of my life. Somehow, in the middle of them, Harrison was born.

“Where are they buried?” Harrison asks.

“Cokeworth,” Severus says. “Do you wish to see them?”

“No,” Harrison shrugs. “But it’s good to know. It’s good when ... when there’s a place to go.”

Severus knows he is thinking of his godfather. Sirius motherfucking Black, determined to be elusive even in death. Severus keeps his mouth shut. He has studiously said nothing to Harrison about Black since the hospital. He will respect the grief of his son and his lover, but he will not

comment in any way because all he could truthfully say is that Black's death at least repaid the imbalance of the universe. *He took my child from me on the floor of Grimmauld Place.* It is only fitting he sacrifices himself on Harrison's account. In Severus' book, it is at least a debt settled, even if Severus never got to curse the man into oblivion.

"Was it bad last night?" Harrison asks. Severus blinks at the rapid change of conversation and realises the child is asking about his nightmares. He is biting his lips and flushing. Severus tries to keep it short. Harrison is horribly self-conscious about how his trauma is manifesting so Severus is only daring to speak of it in purely medical, factual terms. Lupin is the one who is coaxing the boy on his feelings and from everything Lupin reports back in bed at the end of the day, it is an uphill fucking struggle.

"Four," Severus says, referencing the number of times the boy woke to scream.

"Shit," Harrison mutters. "Sorry."

"It is of no matter," Severus says.

"Fucking is," Harrison's voice is suddenly harsh. "What am I going to do at school? I can't be screaming and shit in the dorm room. Malfoy will lose his mind."

"There is no guarantee that you will still suffer nightmares in two months," Severus says calmly, noticing that his son intends to return to Slytherin. *My house.* "If you do, we shall manage it but more importantly, *language.*"

"Well, it's not like you can take away my axe," Harrison scowls, eyes flashing darkly. "Can't even bloody hold it."

He flexes his still bandaged hand. The persistent tremor has not reduced and Harrison's grip is even worse without his finger. It is not healing perfectly and Harrison is taking regular infection suppressant potions. Severus didn't need the teeth marks in Harrison's bone to tell him that Bellatrix's mouth is full of hideous bacteria.

"Weasley already informed me the goblin King has promised you lessons in other areas of goblin warfare," Severus raises his eyebrows. "Would you like me to retract my permission for you to attend?"

Harrison rolls his eyes and hisses harshly in parseltongue. Severus knows he is cursing but at least it is some meagre level of obedience. He carefully raises a different topic.

"You must know that Albus will likely desire you to return to Gryffindor," Severus says slowly. "Is that no longer your preference?"

Severus tries not to show how much of a victory he would feel if it were not.

"Doesn't matter," Harrison grunts. "They won't take me."

"What do you mean?"

"Fred and George have left, that means I've only got Hermione, Ron, Neville and Ginny on my side in there. That's four of them against literally everyone else." Harrison looks up at Severus

darkly. "At least in Slytherin, they're all scared of me or too scared of Voldemort to touch me. Besides that, I've got Theo and Blaise and Daphne and Fitz and the snakes."

"The snakes?" Severus asks blankly, trying to understand how the first year, Fitz-Tremblay, can be a possible asset to his son.

"Yeah, the house snakes," Harrison says absently, chopping turmeric slowly as if it is not at all remarkable that he would have made allies of the snakes made of magic that have guarded the Slytherin common room for generations. "The Gryffindors aren't scared of me and they don't believe Voldemort's back. They don't even want me."

"I imagine the Slytherins want you even less," Severus says drily.

"Yeah," Harrison snorts with laughter. "But at least they let me sleep in the dorm."

Severus stops stirring for a moment, the rod limp in his hand as he stares at his son. *What in Hades fucking hell is this?*

"Explain," he demands softly.

Harrison at least has the presence of mind to notice Severus is enraged and immediately tries to back peddle.

"It's not that bad," he mutters. "Kreacher made me a tent in the common room."

"You camped in the Gryffindor common room for three months?"

"It was a really nice tent," Harrison protests. Severus sighs and stares up at the wooden beams of the cottage. *Cent, quatre-vingt-dix-neuf, quatre-vingt-dix-huit, quatre-vingt-dix-sept ...*

"I will be as clear as I possibly can be," Severus tries to keep his voice from shaking. "If that happens again you will present yourself at my quarters immediately. Am I understood?"

"Wouldn't that kind of break your cover?" Harrison sneers.

"You have an invisibility cloak and you have never been troubled by using it to creep around the castle after hours," Severus says levelly. "So I repeat: Am I understood?"

Harrison stares at him for a moment and Severus swears he feels a twinge of a pull in the tethering on his wrist. Then Harrison rolls his eyes and goes back to slicing turmeric.

"Fine," he mutters mulishly. Severus understands why a child such as Harrison would readily accept sleeping on the floor like a tramp after the bedroom Severus witnessed in Privet drive, but the idea that Harrison did not come to him for help is painful. *He did not trust me as he does now. It is different.* Many things, Severus realises, are different now. It is time that Harrison became aware of it.

"You do realise that your status inside Gryffindor tower will likely change again?" Severus says quietly.

"Why?" Harrison snorts. "Now I'm the son of Sirius Black and Voldemort's back too. They'll probably blame Sirius for that, I'm sure Malfoy will, and then they'll blame me."

“The Daily Prophet has a different take,” Severus says slowly. It’s time for Harrison to know a modicum of truth. “They are styling you as some kind of hero against the Dark Lord.”

“What, so he’s like Darth Vader and I’m a Jedi?” Harrison frowns. Severus winces, wishing that he did not understand the absurd muggle reference.

“No, it is perhaps more akin to ... Macbeth and McDuff,” Severus says, finally landing on a reference that Harrison will understand and he can just about bear to speak aloud.

“Well, am I Macbeth or McDuff?” Harrison asks.

“In the vaguest sense, you are McDuff,” Severus hesitates. “The phrase, ‘the Chosen One,’ has been used.”

Harrison stops slicing and stares up at him slowly.

“How often?” the boy asks warily.

“Frequently.”

“Motherfucker!”

Severus is about to reprimand the boy when he sees that Harrison has accidentally sliced through his finger with the paring knife. Harrison is staring down at the blood as it wells in the cut, trembling violently. *Oh shit.* Severus moves quickly, grabbing a tea towel and pressing it against Harrison’s hand. The boy’s eyes are closed and he is breathing shallowly, face pale. Severus knows the signs of a panic attack when he sees them. It is, however, the first time he has seen this type of panic in Harrison during the waking hours. Another development for Lupin to examine.

“Breathe,” Severus intones gently, holding firm pressure on the wound. “You are safe, *farzandam*. Keep your eyes closed, I shall close the wound.”

Severus lifts the tea towel as Harrison leans his body against the counter and murmurs a quick incantation to knit the skin back together. He then quickly uses his wand to clean away the traces of blood, tossing the tea towel into the sink. Harrison doesn’t move, the hand with the Prince ring still held in Severus’, eyes squeezed shut.

“Done,” Severus says quietly.

The boy nods firmly but does not open his eyes. His limbs are still trembling. The tethering around their wrists is too tight for Severus to pull his hand away from his son’s and Severus is not the one doing it. Harrison, Severus realises, is scared.

“Where is your mind?” Severus asks.

“*The cage*,” Harrison hisses. The parseltongue slips into Severus’ mind just as it did during the night. This is the only way that Harrison will refer to his time with Bellatrix. At least, the only way he will refer to it whilst he is fully conscious. In his dreams, he speaks more, but still only in parseltongue. Severus does not know if Harrison is ever going to be capable of speaking about his torture in English.

“What can you smell?” Severus asks quietly.

“*Blood*,” Harrison hisses. Severus' stomach contracts, because this means Harrison's flashback is so intense it is impacting his senses. He waves his wand, directing a small waft of air towards Harrison so the scented steam of the brewing potion engulfs him.

“Now?” Severus prompts.

“*Lemon*,” Harrison hisses. “*blood. Cold. Mint. Rosemary. sage.*”

Severus does not know where some of those ingredients are coming from since they do not feature in a nerve replenisher, but he is grateful at least, that Harrison seems to be coming out of it. After all, he cannot imagine that Bellatrix had herbs with her.

“Where is your body?” Severus asks.

Harrison takes a rattling breath and swallows hard.

“The cottage. Skye,” he whispers hoarsely in English. “With you.”

“With me,” Severus repeats firmly. He grips Harrison's wrist hard. “Will I let harm come to you here?”

“No,” Harrison whispers. He opens his eyes. Words are inscribed upon his mind, Severus can remove them so easily: *Not without dying*. Like Arthur Weasley did. Like Black did. Severus is not surprised that Harrison has been disabused of the notion that a grown Wixen on his side will inevitably save him. His enemies are too many and too strong.

“Listen to me,” Severus says. “This house is warded by ancient magic I took myself from the Prince manuscripts. It has inaccessible floos. The only person able to apparate through the wards is me, anyone else must apparate to the edge of my wards which extend a mile in every direction. It is under a fidelius charm and I am the only secret keeper. It is unplotable. I also used a rune sequence Narcissa designed to make it untraceable on all muggle satellites. You cannot be harmed here.”

Except by yourself, Severus thinks, remembering the cold of the Black magic encasing his son the night before. Recalling Harrison letting the ocean water fall on top of his head. Teaching Harrison to value his own life may be the hardest task of his life.

“He could torture it out of you,” Harrison mutters. His eyes flick to Severus' rolled up sleeve and the Dark Mark.

“He could. It would not make a difference,” Severus says. “My mother was the most proficient occlumens and legilimens who has perhaps ever lived in this country.”

“So?” Harrison frowns.

“There is a technique in mind magics that has no name, it is not recorded or taught anywhere, only rumoured about. It allows the occlumens to ensure a failsafe with a secret.”

“What does that mean?” Harrison asks.

“It will burn the library to the ground. Permanently,” Severus says. Harrison's eyes widen. “My mother taught it to me.”

“It's like a suicide pill,” Harrison whispers.

“Yes,” Severus nods. “I have it in place. Do you believe me?”

Harrison nods. Harrison looks down at his Prince ring.

“But I’m not going to stay here, am I?”

“You are anxious about leaving,” Severus says.

Harrison scowls at the word and shrugs, pulling his hand away and stuffing both in his pockets.

“You will be safe in Rome. Lupin will apparate you directly into the Contessa’s home, there will be no moment for interception.”

“I know,” Harrison grunts. His eyes are fixed on Severus’ hand and the tether there. Severus watches him, feeling growing astonishment dawning on him. Is it possible that the child is anxious because I will not be with him? Severus concentrates on his son’s Prince ring, on his own ring, on the magic between them that draws them together. Harrison shifts slightly and Severus knows that he has felt the tingle in his Prince ring. Harrison looks up at him mulishly but nods shortly. He understands. They have the portkey. They have the tethers. It will have to be enough.

“Harrison,” Severus says quietly.

“I know,” Harrison shuffles kicking his red and gold socks against the floor before looking up at Severus, a familiar, irritating indolent expression crossing his face. “So everyone knows then? About the prophecy and all that shit?”

“Language,” Severus says automatically. “No one knows.”

“You said, with the Prophet -,”

“You are surprised that when a population realises they are be terrorised by a Dark Lord they were convinced they had defeated they turn back to the talisman that circumvented his ascension in the past?” Severus raises his eyebrows. “You have more wit than that.”

“That’s what I am?” Harrison scowls. “A talisman?”

“Unless you are of the absurd belief that an infant could magically best a fifty-year-old wizard of unmatched magical talent,” Severus drawls. “Although Lupin does recall that you walked exceptionally early for a one-year-old.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harrison rolls his eyes. “So they’re ... what? They’re all afraid and looking for someone to fix it?”

“That would be my assumption. I cannot guarantee that there are unfortunate souls out there who believe you were magically unparalleled at fifteen months old,” Severus says. “Of course, they will not have met you personally.”

“Rude,” Harrison mutters, but Severus sees a slight smirk on his lips. “But I’m a Mage and maybe a Necromancer, right? So I am kinda magically unparalleled?”

Severus gives the child a hard stare.

“You are an enigma,” he says shortly, “and thoroughly irritating.”

Harrison gives him a particular infuriating grin which, no matter when he sees it, reminds him annoyingly of Black and stares him straight in the eye, letting words form there, ready to be plucked: *Must be genetic*. It is an odd combination of feelings, Severus thinks, this utter frustration combined with the overwhelming sudden desire to laugh. He has not felt it truly, he thinks since Regulus died. A desire to scold and protect, to deliver censure and affection. It is a livid ache and joy inside his chest that he must breathe through for a millisecond. *This parenting malarky is utterly absurd*.

“Indeed,” Severus says drily, reaching for a mug on the drying rack and taking his measuring cup, pouring the appropriate dose of nerve replenisher out and handing the mug to Harrison. It is one of those leftovers from the days when the cottage was still a holiday rental. Harrison cradles the Pride of Scotland mug, fingers playing against the chipped rim. He lifts it to his lips and sips, face clearing with surprise.

“It tastes nicer when it’s hot,” he comments.

“It is much more intense also and can be addictive at this temperature,” Severus nods. “Which is why we do not typically prescribe it at this dose.”

Harrison looks at him curiously.

“You know about doses and things, medicine stuff.”

“I do.”

“Remus says you’re not just a potioneer. You’re a doctor too, like ...” Harrison frowns. “An ... Onvoter?”

“An Envouter,” Severus corrects, collecting his vials from the cupboard under the counter and beginning to pour doses and cork them.

“It’s like a healer?” Harrison says. “Or ... I dunno, a surgeon?”

“The most appropriate muggle equivalent would be a military paramedic or surgeon,” Severus muses. “It is a position created for battle.”

“That’s a cool job,” Harrison sips his potion. “Did you have to go to University?”

“Wixen do not have Universities,” Severus pauses in his task. “Surely you have been told that?”

“No,” Harrison shrugs and asks Severus’ least favourite question. “Who would have told me that?”

The answer, infuriatingly, is always no one and at the same time, literally any wixen adult the child has ever been under the care of. Push it aside, the child needs education, not rage at the neglect he has experienced in both the muggle and Wixen world.

“Higher education in the Wixen world is built on the same principle as it was in the fourteenth century of muggle culture,” Severus says. “That of patronage.”

“Jesus, the fourteenth century?” Harrison stares. “That’s like, so long ago.”

“You are the pinnacle of observation,” Severus says drily. “Many cornerstones of Wixen culture were established then, under the Black Prince’s reign.”

“The Black Prince?” Harrison’s eyes sharpen. “What did he do?”

Severus looks at him curiously. He has never known Harrison to be interested in magical history but he continues anyway.

“Before the Black Prince’s reign, education was limited to Hogwarts only and it was a different world entirely. More akin to a monastery than a modern school.”

“Like, praying and stuff?” Harrison frowns. “To who? Do we have gods?”

“The Hogwarts founders had their gods, yes,” Severus smiles at Harrison’s derisive tone. He feels very much the same. “Slytherin particularly.”

“Apep and Nehbakau?”

“What occasion would you have to know that?” Severus stares.

“Heir of Slytherin,” Harrison grunts, as if that’s enough of a reason for Severus to understand. It is not. “The others?”

“Hufflepuff believed in earth magic, elemental magic, it was a core part of her educational process,” Severus says. “There is no knowledge of Ravenclaw’s worship practice, but her remaining writings explore some of the virtues of asceticism. No one knows about Gryffindor and all of his students were notoriously tight-lipped on the subject.”

“You say that like he had students all to himself,” Harrison frowns.

“He did,” Severus nods. “The earliest model of the sorting hat was not merely based on sorting like-minded individuals together, it was established as a mode to allow students access to a mentor who would most suit their magical abilities.”

“Huh,” Harrison frowns. “Why? I mean, why wouldn’t they all learn a bit of everything?”

“For survival,” Severus says frankly. “In those days, children needed to be trained for a role in their communities that would protect them from muggles. Healers, Warriors, Scryers, Rune carvers, and Potioneers were all common. The Black Prince was the first to establish a central governing body, to create safety in the isles so that further education and patronage could be considered an option. He created the notion that Masters of their craft all over the isles would take students on for a number of years until they too, became Masters. That is how Masteries are pursued to this day. The Black Prince was the first leader to be concerned with legacy.”

“Yeah, he is,” Harrison says softly, a strange fondness crossing his face as he looks down at his Black ring. Severus raises his eyebrows. Severus is about to delicately question exactly how his child has an idea of what the Black Prince of Cornwall was concerned with and exactly why he refers to him as if he is a current acquaintance but Harrison is looking back up at Severus and asking a question. “But Hermione says Remus is a doctor.”

“He has a doctorate,” Severus corrects irritably. “It is a research Mastery from a magical library. He is not a doctor.”

“Is that better than a Mastery?”

“No,” Severus says forcefully.

“Why?”

“Because I say so,” Severus snaps, distracted as Harrison’s owl swoops in through the window with a beak full of letters. A beautiful barn owl follows it, landing on Severus’ shoulder and dropping a letter into his hand. He rips it open with a frown, seeing a familiar elegant scrawl.

The Selkie’s Skin, Grassmarket, Edinburgh. 7 pm this evening.

Narcissa has not written to him since they left Hogwarts. He has not expected to hear from her the entire summer, her position as the wife of the minister is far too precarious. Lucius needs a few months to settle into his role before his paranoia will abate. So her missive can only be urgent.

“Narcissa?” Harrison asks quietly, flicking through his pile of letters.

“Yes,” Severus looks up at him. “I need to go to Edinburgh tonight.”

“Okay.”

“I may have to leave before Lupin returns.”

“Okay.”

“You must not leave the wards,” Severus says severely. “Do not disobey me. I shall know.”

“Where the fuck would I go?” Harrison mumbles.

“It is a question I have never had an adequate answer to and yet it has never stopped you in the past,” Severus snaps. He is instantly regretful. The last time Harrison stepped out of bounds, he was taken. Harrison seems to see the progression of his thought because his eyes flash darkly and Severus sees the boy physically bristle.

“Yeah, but we don’t talk about things we did in the past, do we?” Harrison snarks back, downing the rest of his potion and slamming the mug on the counter, sparks cracking the china as he takes his letters and slams his way into the bedroom. Severus sighs and rests his hands on the counter, gesturing his wand to repair the broken mug. This is the rhythm of his days with Harrison at the moment. At times, he is certain of his child’s opinion of him. He is the boy’s defender, the child’s healer, the person to teach him to survive. At other times, everything that was said between them the night Harrison was taken rises between them like a bloated corpse, refusing to die. Severus knows he is not forgiven and has no desire to be, but the sudden swing of his child’s blame and doubt is sometimes disorientating. That Harrison trusts him to protect him, Severus has no doubt. That Harrison trusts him to be kind to him, Severus does not know.

“Kreacher,” Severus says tiredly. The elf appears, glaring around the kitchen and the potions ingredients across the counter.

“Lord Prince calls?” Kreacher growls, fingers twitching with a clear desire to clean.

“I have to leave in a few hours,” Severus finishes pouring the potion into the vials. “Harrison must not leave the ward under any circumstances.”

“Kreacher serves Lord Black, not Lord Prince,” Kreacher sniffs. Severus scowls. He hates it when the elf calls Harrison by his title and consequently, Kreacher does it all the time. “But Kreacher will protect his Master.”

“Good,” Severus mutters. There are not many things in this life Severus can rely on, but he can rely on this: Kreacher will always protect Harrison whilst being as irritating as possible.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

The Selkie's Skin

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (PTSD/Depression)

This week, Severus and Narcissa. Next week, learning about consequences.

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

“I’ve booked a room upstairs.”

It’s the first thing Narcissa says when he sits down at the table with two whiskies. Narcissa is sitting like a pearl amongst the dark wood and smoky furnishings of the Selkie’s Skin. She is not trying to hide her appearance so Severus can only assume she has paid an extraordinary amount, either in gold or favours, to ensure their privacy in this bustling pub. Severus pushes the whisky towards her and gestures for the bartender to bring over a bottle. He does so and makes no move to demand payment. *Gold then*, Severus thinks, looking around at the old-timers and other grizzled Creatures at the bar, and silver for the regulars.

“Why would you do that?” Severus asks, sipping his drink.

“I find it best to keep such things simple,” Narcissa says. She leans forward and cups Severus’ face, letting her silver hair fall forward to obscure their mouths from view. “We are having an affair.”

“Are we?” Severus raises his eyebrows and leans back. “Interesting.”

He can’t admit that it is not a tidy plan. They have a history that no one can deny. They can easily fall into the patterns of being seen and caught, the brief meetings in strange places, lingering in upstairs rooms at inns. It is much more likely that innkeepers and pub landlords will report far and wide that the gracious Lady Malfoy, wife of the Minister for Magic, is slumming it with a Potions professor no less than they will suspect that they are really meeting to exchange information. Though he supposes it is no coincidence that Narcissa has chosen a pub in Scotland, technically beyond Lucius’ jurisdiction. The Ministry of Magic does not have complete governance of Scotland or this dank little pub in the Grassmarket. Instead, the Ministry must coordinate and work with the Rood, also named the bana-bhuidseach, the council of Scottish Wixen elders who report to Janet Gowdie, who sits on the Wixen seats of the Congregation. With one foot in Venice and one in London, the Rood works mostly amicably with the Minister for England, Wales, Cornwall and Northern Ireland, but no Minister of Magic has ever been beloved here. Severus is not surprised that Narcissa has chosen the place where people are least likely to want to ingratiate themselves to a newly initiated minister. *Even so*, Severus thinks with dark satisfaction, *it shall enrage Lucius no end.*

“Will you come upstairs?” she asks softly. Severus can feel the ears of all of the patrons twitching towards her low, melodious voice. “Have you time?”

“An hour only,” Severus stands and lifts the bottle, catching the Landlord’s eye. “May I?”

“Help yerself, lad,” the landlord mutters and Narcissa bows her head regally, leading Severus to the small, rickety staircase and up to a single door which she unlocks with a small key. Behind them, a buzz of curious chatter begins. It’s a dingy, dull place, a forlorn four-poster bed with dusty tartan blankets dominates the room, a tiny leaded window looking down onto the market square. Severus closes the threadbare curtains. Narcissa lights a few candles.

“You told them we were discussing business, I assume,” he says, jerking his head to the door.

“Of course,” Narcissa sits on the bed, crossing her legs. She has even had the foresight to wear a conservative black dress that has a surprise slit, revealing her long legs in stockings. Anyone who catches a glimpse shall think she is a woman concealing outrageous lingerie of which, to be fair, Narcissa does have an excellent collection. “The surest way for a married woman to spread rumours of an affair is to deny it entirely.”

Severus nods and leans against the wall expectantly. He knows she’s done this before, with different Death Eaters in the first war, in order to disseminate information. She must be a dab hand at it by this point. Severus looks at Narcissa. She is flawless, undoubtedly, but there is a palest of blue bags under her eyes. She does not look well, but Severus will not ask her. She called this meeting. She must be the first to speak.

“The Dark Lord has my son.”

“What?” Severus hisses, lurching forward. He is filled with visions of the shrieking shack, of Harrison tumbling into his arms in the hospital wing, of a cage made of magic that Severus has never seen but imagines every night in his dreams.

“Not like that,” Narcissa shakes her head quickly. “It is only ... he will take the mark, Severus.”

Severus stares at her. Images of Regulus’ marking chase around inside his head most unhelpfully.

“What would possess him to do this?”

Draco is a little self-centred, which can be easily remedied with a hard Master once he finishes Hogwarts (If Narcissa and Severus can find him one that Lucius will tolerate) but he is not in any way political. He has aspirations to be admired only. He has no interest in the hardships of serving the Dark Lord.

“Lucius,” Narcissa closes her eyes painfully. “The Dark Lord is displeased with how things unravelled in the Department of Mysteries.”

“Yet he let Lucius ascend.”

Lucius’ ascension was practically overnight. The Wizengamot accepted his lie that he brought Black to justice and his overwhelming favour with the dark and mutual majority ensured an easy confirmation of his position, despite the papers screaming about the Dark Lord’s appearance. Lucius has been smart. He has not denied the Dark Lord’s return, rather, he has assured the Wixen

public that, unlike last time, war will be avoided. Peaceful solutions will be found. Meanwhile, he pushes through the Dark Lord's agenda through backdoors and terrible legislation.

"On a tight leash," Narcissa swallows hard. "And on the promise of our son's servitude."

"Draco was part of the bargain?" Severus did not hear a hint of it the night he and Lucius and Bellatrix played parlour tricks for the Dark Lord before he decided which of them would go retrieve the prophecy. As wrapped up as Lucius is in his own self-importance, Severus cannot imagine a world where Lucius would put Draco's life down on the table.

"Not at the time, but the Dark Lord tends to demand payments after the fact," Narcissa murmurs. Severus sees the way her fingers clench tightly together, the whites of her knuckles standing out under her pale skin like opals. "He will be marked. The Dark Lord has a task for him. At school."

Sweet Merlin, no. Narcissa opens her eyes and they are swimming with sadness and wrenching fear. Severus sits down heavily beside her, his hand groping for hers. *We swore to keep our children alive.* He does not want to ask it but he has to ask it.

"Narcissa," he whispers hoarsely. "Has the Dark Lord asked Draco to kill my son?"

"I don't know." A pale tear slips down her cheek. "Draco will not tell me. Neither will Lucius, I'm not even sure if he knows."

"The Dark Lord spoke with Draco?" Severus feels horribly nauseous. *Holy Circe, it's happening again.* The children. He always starts with the children.

"Yes," Narcissa shakes her head. "And Bella."

Severus can't help the way his hand tightens on hers. Fury leeches through his blood.

"I know," Narcissa whispers.

She does, Severus can allow, have some measure of the disgust Severus has for the woman that tortured his son, but she cannot possibly know it truly. Not whilst a part of her, even the smallest part, still remembers the smiling sister she may have once been.

"Can Lucius not find another?" Severus thinks rapidly, but the options for student potential Death Eaters are limited. Gregory and Vincent are obviously lacking in the necessary cunning, Tremblay has graduated and is now a protege of Bellatrix's, along with a few others in his year. None of Severus' sixth-year students has marked parents, though the Parkinson daughter might take it if her father does. The only other fifth years are Draco and Theodore. Severus feels a tugging inside his chest. Harrison would never forgive him, but Severus witnessed Draco's first steps. He heard his first words. He cannot help it. Severus wishes it was Theodore.

"No others have erred as Lucius has," Narcissa sighs, "and no others have the fervour of my son."

"Draco cares nothing for politics," Severus says.

"The upset caused by your child has a much further impact than you realise," Narcissa says. "The Heir to the House of Black destabilised the balance of Slytherin and a child who was once content to imagine himself the biggest fish in a very small pond is no longer."

"You blame Harrison for Draco's choices?" Severus hisses.

“No,” Narcissa’s eyes flash dangerously. “I blame his father, of course. Who else instilled upon him the belief that everything must be given to him, not striven for? Why else when faced with political turmoil in a situation he has long thrived, when the Zabini Heir finally grew into the political powerhouse he will ascend to, would Draco simply surrender the ground he has held for five years? Who else has taught Draco that leadership shall simply be given to him because of who he is, not defended or fought for?”

Severus remembers when he took his oath to Lucius to guard Draco. Remembers Lucius’ words, whispered over the cradle. *He shall have no less than he deserves and he shall know all of his life how deserving he is.* The promise of privilege has soured, as Severus had always feared it would.

“Have you told him?” Severus asks. “Have you talked to your son?”

“Yes,” Narcissa’s expression is strained. “I have told him I can get him out, that we can say he has dragon pox, that we can transfer him to Beauxbatons for the weather and his health but my sister,” Narcissa’s voice becomes a growl, “my accursed sister has got her teeth into him.”

A poor choice of words. Severus winces, thinking of Harrison’s hand, and then pulls himself away from the memory of scarred bone.

“What has she done?”

“Convinced him that there will be ... glory,” Narcissa shakes her head, tears falling freely. “You know Draco, you know how he is with fame and fortune and repute. All he wants is to be respected.”

By Harrison. Those are the unspoken words that sit between them. They have both known that since Draco climbed onto the Hogwarts Express, expecting his classmates to be in his thrall, he has been fixated on the one that wasn’t. *Can it truly be possible that my godson is considering being marked by a Dark Lord just to court the attention of my son?* Severus suddenly feels very, very weary of teenagers.

“He will not get it with this avenue,” Severus says honestly. Harrison has no respect for any Death Eater living except Severus, and even then the respect is earned in spite of it.

“I know,” Narcissa swallows hard. “I have another suggestion.”

“Which is?” Severus prompts.

Narcissa takes a short breath.

“I would like to ask Harrison to take Draco under the sanctuary of the House of Black.”

“You cannot think that Draco would go,” Severus says. Draco desired to be the next Black Lord. He will not come in under the wings of another, especially not his school rival. There is also a real chance that Harrison would not accept him. *Not if anything Harrison has ever said or done is anything to go by,* Severus thinks drily.

“He does not need to be willing,” Narcissa says. “He is my son, my progeny, I am a daughter of the House of Black and Harrison is my Lord.”

Severus winces. More than he hates Kreacher calling Harry Lord Black, Severus despises Narcissa doing it.

“Even so, he cannot claim a person’s life without their consent,” Severus says sharply.

“He can,” Narcissa whispers, “if I have Harrison claim him in a blood ritual -,”

“You want my child to all but adopt your child?” Severus stares at Narcissa. “It is wildly dangerous not to mention unethical.”

“I cannot be lectured on ethics when my child’s life is in the balance,” Narcissa’s eyes flash.

“Cissa, even if this was feasible it is still inadvisable,” Severus says. “They will murder one another.”

This is not unreasonable, and he feels certain that Harrison would be the one to strike the final blow. Draco would irritate him in a million different ways and Harrison would eventually lash out, with devastating results. Harrison is an untapped powder keg of destruction and the fewer opportunities he has to murder Severus’ godson, the better.

“If Draco is under the Sanctuary of the House of Black, he is under oath not to harm the Lord that granted him safety,” Narcissa’s voice is tight. Severus can tell she has been thinking about this for days. “Then he cannot possibly be used in any plot against your son.”

“But Harrison has to announce him,” Severus shakes Narcissa’s wrist gently, hoping to wake her out of this strange fervour. “He cannot declare to have kidnapped the child, there has to have been some willing somewhere, some dissension, either from Draco or yourself. You cannot think you will not be discovered.”

“Not necessarily,” Narcissa’s hands are shaking. “The lore of the Noble and Most Ancient houses says that sanctuary must be publicly announced but not to whom. He could announce it to another Black.”

To Narcissa. Severus then sees the weaving web of Narcissa’s plan, as frail as spider silk. Its patterns are intricate but its core is simplicity itself - incapacitate Draco so he cannot be incapacitated by the Dark Lord.

“You wish Harrison to grant sanctuary to your son in secret, without Draco knowing, to bind him unwillingly, and then you wish to only announce it to yourself?” Severus stares at Narcissa. “Then what will you tell Draco? This plan is only effective if he cannot complete his mission and to do that, he must know.”

“You will tell me,” Narcissa’s voice is hoarse. “In your capacity as a spy for Dumbledore. You shall hear it from the Order, of course. You will tell me and my son that Harrison’s extraordinary magic has bound all of the daughters of the House of Black and their underage progeny.”

“Bellatrix is not bound!” Severus hisses. “She will see through it immediately.”

“She may not, she has no progeny underage who would be bound.” Narcissa rubs a palm against her robes anxiously. “She is ... deluded when it comes to Harrison and the Black magic.”

“You want to fuel the fire of that delusion?” Severus stares at her. “You wish for me to tell you and Draco and by proxy, Lucius and the Dark Lord that my son is powerful enough to do this?”

“Yes,” Narcissa closes her eyes. “Because he is.”

“I would still prefer the Dark Lord not to know that!” Severus snarls. He has idle, horrifying daydreams about the exact fervent, possessive look that would steal across the Dark Lord’s face if he could see the way Harrison’s untamed magic explodes every night. “Hades, Cissa! Have you lost your damn mind?”

The hand that grips his becomes a vice, Narcissa opens her eyes and Severus sees the dark glitter of the Black magic in it.

“The Dark Lord has my son.”

Narcissa’s voice is pitched low, full of a fury that Severus has not seen or felt in decades, not since Draco was first born and for the first three months she was like a lioness, growling and snarling at anyone who dared approach, seeing threats in shadows.

“I understand because recently, he had mine,” Severus says slowly loosening her grip.

“Then help me,” Narcissa whispers. “Please.”

Severus sighs and stares down at the dirty floorboards underneath their feet. Miles away in Skye, Harrison is healing. Miles away in Oxfordshire, Bellatrix is no doubt teaching Draco how to fine-tune his cruciatus curse. For a long time, Draco was the only child Severus loved and this choice would have been simple. Now it is not. Now there is Harrison.

“The Dark Lord knows your son is powerful,” Narcissa’s voice has returned to normal, some of the practical coldness leaking back in. “You would not be telling him anything he does not know.”

“The risks are astoundingly high,” Severus says slowly. “Even if Harrison agrees and even if your ritual works and we take this information to the Dark Lord, there is every chance that he will not believe Harrison capable. That he will scent dissension.”

And then we will all be fucked, Severus adds, silently.

“If that becomes the case, I shall make my true involvement known,” Narcissa says calmly. “From the safety of Lord Black’s protection, of course.”

Severus sees that this is where she would turn, just as Severus would. At the point where they can no longer effectively protect their children on the inside of the Dark Lord’s circle, they will twist and protect from the outside.

“Turning coat is not without consequences,” Severus whispers. “Not for you, or for those you love.”

Severus’ stomach swoops painfully at the thought of what may happen to Draco if his mother is revealed a traitor.

“I am confident in Lucius’ love,” Narcissa says.

Severus knows she is not speaking of Lucius' love for her. For Draco, Lucius would rend the heavens and earth.

"Do you not think the Dark Lord will be?" Severus hisses. "That he might kill Draco to torture Lucius?"

"Lucius will not let that happen," Narcissa says. "He would die beforehand."

"Then you shall all be dead!" Severus exclaims, leaping to his feet and throwing his fist into the bedpost. It makes a loud clunking sound as it shunts back against the wall and the dark wood splinters.

"Oy! You'll pay for any damage, lass!" The Landlord yells up the stairs.

Severus hisses in through his teeth and cradles his broken hand. He remembers, viciously, the night after the Longbottom's deaths, when he and Lucius and Narcissa had all stood around Draco's crib, watching him sleep, wordless in terror of the way a young family, with a child just like theirs, had been ripped to shreds.

"Well," Narcissa gives him a wintry smile. "At least you are contributing satisfactorily to the rumour that we are lovers."

"I should have told you," Severus mutters, pressing his forehead against the bowing bedpost. "I should have told you both then to take Draco and run."

Narcissa raises her eyebrows. She does not need to ask at what point in history he could have been referring. There are so many.

"There is no running now," Narcissa slowly reaches for his hand, looking at the bloody knuckles and tutting. "Darling boy, making such a mess of yourself."

She taps her wand against the split skin and it is clean. She rubs her thumb across the small cuts on his knuckle almost fondly. She is, Severus thinks, the most magnificent person to ever grace his life. Lily was the centre of his world and Regulus was astonishing, a surprise at every turn, but Narcissa is *magnificus*. He hears Lupin in first year, teaching him Latin: from ' *magus* ' and ' *facere* ' - great and to make. *To do great deeds*.

"You are risking too much," Severus whispers.

"It is mine to risk, is it not?" Narcissa tilts her head to the side and looks at him gently. "I understand your reticence but there is a version of these events where Draco walks free from whatever task he has been given and is, Morgana willing, deemed little more than useless since he cannot take arms against your son."

"You know what the Dark Lord does to useless things," Severus says harshly.

"When Draco has fallen from grace, he shall no longer long for the Dark Lord's countenance upon him," Narcissa says. "He will desire fresh pastures again."

"And then you will leave," Severus finishes for her. Narcissa nods, her blue eyes clear of any doubt. "You will leave Lucius."

“We will keep Draco alive,” Narcissa says. Her eyes drift down to her wedding ring, a slim gold band on her finger. “Together or apart.”

It is what Severus wants for her, he realises, the best he can hope for his best friend and his godson: Exile and fear. Fleeing is only marginally better than staying, only because they shall live longer. At least he hopes. It is the worst best option.

“These are not good choices,” he says.

“Do not make me say it, Severus,” Narcissa whispers. Severus knows what she means. He swore a vow to her when they began to investigate the providence of his heir that he would protect Draco from the Dark Lord with his life. He did not anticipate that it would include protecting Draco from himself.

“I did not vow to protect him with my son, Cissa,” Severus says sharply.

“Draco is yours too,” Narcissa’s eyes are flashing. How can Severus deny her? To do so would invalidate her protection of Harrison.

“I shall bring it to Harrison, if that is what you wish,” Severus says quietly. “Although there is no guarantee he shall accept it.”

“I do not ask for guarantees,” Narcissa says, running her thumb up the veins on the back of Severus’ hand.

“I cannot do it immediately, Harrison is ...” Severus hesitates and finds he does not have the words for everything Harrison is being and not being right now. “You shall see tomorrow, in Ireland.”

“Very well, but it must be soon,” Narcissa’s eyes are cloudy with despair. “Draco shall be marked by summer’s end.”

Two months. Two months before Hogwarts. Two months to rehabilitate Harrison and save Draco. It seems impossible, especially impossible on only two and half hours of sleep and about a dozen cups of Kreacher’s blackest coffee, but Severus finds himself nodding.

“Thank you,” Narcissa breathes out and rocks forward, pressing her forehead against Severus’ sternum, still gripping his hand ferociously tight. She breathes in a small, dry sob. Severus finds his spare hand tangling in her hair and he is rocking her gently, side to side, whispering soothing noises. There is a small chance, a tiny chance, Severus thinks, that the task Draco has been appointed for is not Harrison’s murder at all. Though not if Harrison’s record for courting the absurdity of fate is anything to go by.

“Did you ... scry for it? The task Draco is keeping hidden?” Severus whispers into her hair.

“Yes,” She pulls back, sniffing but somehow still looking flawless. It is Narcissa’s gift to wear precisely none of her grief on her face. “It was inconclusive.”

“What did you see?”

“I fear I should not tell you, but you asked the question,” Narcissa sighs.

“And so the answer must be given,” Severus finishes the old Seers phrase for her and strokes a few damp tendrils of hair out of her eyebrows. “Speak.”

"I called into the glass for Draco's task, I took it to the mirror many times, with hair and blood and skin," Narcissa bends down and presses her lips, so very gently, against Severus' bloody knuckles. "I am sorry."

"Why?" Severus whispers, his heart thumping.

"Every time I saw only the same thing. A tower and your son."

Severus swallows hard. *The Astronomy tower*. He knows it is not proof, it is not something to hang a fear on, but he feels something terrible open up inside him. It is the same flailing helplessness he felt when he first heard Miss Granger's voice inside his son's memories: *I thought it would be the hardest thing I ever did, to persuade you not to jump*.

"I must go home," Severus says.

— — — — —

Harry dreams.

Beyond the veil, he realises that there is no taste in the air. He stands with the Black Prince and watches the ravens fly in slow circles above a triangle made of shadows.

"I'm dreaming," Harry says.

"You may be," the Black Prince smiles at him.

"Are you?" Harry asks. "Dreaming?"

"It's possible," the Black Prince watches the ravens with soft familiarity. "This is the place where we meet."

Then Sirius' arms are around him. Warm, strong, loving, hugging him from behind with that smell of cigarettes and whisky. "You're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry."

Harry turns with a smile to hug his godfather but Sirius is not there. Bellatrix is leaning over him and Harry is encased in stone, unable to breathe, unable to think through the pain in his hand.

"I expected more."

Harry screams and wakes, but not for long.

The dreams pull him back.

-- -- -- -- --

Harry

What's up?

Respond to your letters

How do you know I've not been doing that?

Granger wrote to me today. She says she has been in France since Weasley's father's funeral and you have not written once.

Okay. How's Daphne?

She's fine. What's the matter?

How's Lord Greengrass?

He is not present. Lady Greengrass is here. What's the matter?

Nothing.

Harry.

I'm fine, Theo.

Then answer your letters.

Harry stares at the letters in his hands. He's sitting out on the beach outside the cottage, watching the sunset. He's been putting reading the letters off, afraid of what he might feel when he does. Three weeks. Today, it is exactly three weeks since Theo took Harry out of the Ministry of Magic. It's over two weeks since Severus put Harry in the magical coma. It's been over a week since Harry woke up. Today it's a week since Arthur's funeral. Yet everything always feels like it is still happening, all at once. *So many fucking edges.*

"Here we fucking go," Harry mutters, turning the letters in his hands. He takes a deep breath and opens the first envelope, recognising the crudely drawn Chudley Cannons badge at the top. Ron.

Dear Harry,

I'm gutted I didn't get to see you after the funeral. I miss you. Bill says that according to Remus, you're okay. That's good. Ginny and I have been home since the funeral. It's already a bloody weird summer. It's weird knowing Hermione's in France and she won't be coming here, it's weird knowing you're not coming here. Percy's back and he's still a dick, but that's the only thing that's the same. Ginny and Hermione broke up. Fred and George are living up in London. Fred's doing okay now, he still has to take about five potions a day but George says he's fine. Charlie's here to stay. He's working with the welsh Green Reserve and living at home with Mum for a bit. Just until she gets used to it. If she can get used to it. Chudley Canons fucked up their last game so that was shit. Charlie's giving Ginny seeker training. She's really good. She's swinging between chaser or seeker for next year. I know you won't mind if she goes out for Seeker again.

Hope you're okay, mate.

Write me back soon.

Love, Ron.

Harry's eyes sting. He thinks of Mrs Weasley in the Burrow kitchen, of the big table half empty, of Mr Weasley's chair absent. He thinks of the piles of muggle magazines gathering dust. He thinks of Mr Weasley's shed. He wonders who will have to sort it out, if they will or if they will leave it full and untouched, a memorial to a lovely, odd, kind man. *A good man who died trying to save me. Another one on the list.* That grief is dull but utterly disabling, the guilt of it as sharp and unstoppable as Bellatrix's knife. Arthur is dead and so is Sirius and there is nothing he can do about it, so Harry folds Ron's letter and opens the next, seeing Ginny's slanting handwriting.

Dear Harry,

We miss you. Ron misses you most of all. I broke up with Hermione. It just felt like the right thing to do. I love her but maybe we're better as friends. I hope you're still going to be my big brother. I know you're Hermione's brother too now, but you were mine first, remember? Hermione and I are still friends, we're not writing right now just to make it a bit easier. Don't tell her, but Dean Thomas has been writing to me. He's really cool. He says he wants to take me to a football game. Bill says he'll get me a portkey to Romford. What do I need to know? I don't want to look stupid. Ron says there's only one ball and one goal but that can't be right. Who would watch that?

Luna's been coming around a lot, hanging out with Ron. She's good for him, I think. They walk and she talks and he likes to listen and hold her hand. They don't kiss or whatever and I know he's not ready to use labels but I think he's found someone he can be happy with for now. I'm not telling you because it's gossip, I'm telling you because I know he won't and if you were here, you'd know. Charlie's giving me seeker tips, I'm using your firebolt. I'm not trying to replace you. I'm trying to do you proud. I'm going to do you proud this year.

Love you

Your dragonet sister

Ginny

Harry laughs and wipes a tear. He misses Ginny suddenly, misses her fierce scowl and the way she flips her long red hair when she's annoyed. He misses the Burrow and the way Ginny flicks soap at him when they wash up dishes together. The missing is overwhelming for a second so he closes his eyes and tries to feel out the bonds he has with the twins. Finds a little flicker of the scent of their aniseed magic. It's not enough but it's all he has and it will have to do. He takes a shuddering breath. He opens the next letter, the blood-red wax seal cracking as he pulls it away.

My Lord,

(Yes, I am calling you that, do not persist in insisting that I do not).

I am hoping this letter finds you well. You should know that Theodore is safe, as I am sure you know, in the House of Lord Greengrass in London. Daphne assures me that whilst he is safe and studious and content to be in touch with you in whatever secret way you communicate, (you are pair of sly beasts) she also reports that he is restless and sleeping poorly. I believe he wears the death of Lestrage heavily, though none knows of it, I believe, but us and I assume, Professor Snape. He will endure, as he always does, but as his shield, I wished you to know the truth before you go to Ireland. I look forward to seeing you in Rome next week. If you and Ambassador Lupin find yourselves relocating to the continent, we shall see more of each other and I shall have even more opportunities to irritate you thoroughly. Assuredly, it shall cause me no end of amusement.

Yours in service and bond,

Blaise Zabini of the House of Zabini

"Yeah, sure it will," Harry snorts, shaking his head at Blaise's words. His stomach flips at the idea of leaving Skye right now, but the concept of seeing Blaise, of having someone who makes him laugh around, is oddly appealing.

If only I can stop being so fucking scared.

Harry swallows hard, and brushes his fingers over the words: *I believe he wears the death of Lestrage heavily.* Harry's sure that's true. He just doesn't know what to do about it. There are lots

of things he and Theo are not talking about right now.

He opens the next letter, it's a short note from Neville wishing him well and containing a packet of seeds for a type of plant that is supposedly very good for a relaxing tea. There's a short, meandering note from Luna that Harry can't follow but which makes him smile. There are some surprising ones too, a note from Susan Bones who says that she's heard about the Department of Mysteries and her bear wands treaties stand and she will stand with him if called in the future. A note in a barely decipherable scrawl from Fitz telling him that he missed him in the last week of class and that he's been keeping an eye on the snakes for Harry and trying to speak to them. The shortest of all is from Gregory Goyle of all people and is a get well soon card with nothing more than a signature. A few more notes and cards from Gryffindors that still like Harry, Katie Bell, Dean, Alicia Spinnet, Colin and Dennis Creevey, all hoping he feels better soon. It seems the story of Harry's kidnap has got around. Finally, Harry has a pile of empty envelopes under a large stone and folded letters and cards under another. Then he turns to the letter he's been avoiding. It's at the top of a stack of three letters, the first one dated the day they arrived in Skye. The second one is dated from the middle of the week. The third one today. The neat, precise handwriting is achingly familiar. Harry pauses, taking a deep breath before he opens the most recent one.

Dear Harry,

Nott says you're okay. He doesn't know why you're not answering your letters. I don't know why either. You just left the funeral, you didn't even tell me you were going. I thought you'd collapsed. I understand things are hard right now, I know you're struggling, but Ron's Dad died. Write him back. Write me back. We all lost people. I don't want to feel like this, like I've lost you too. I don't want to make excuses for you so I'm going to say this and then I'm going to leave it:

We watched you be tortured. We saw it happen. It was the worst thing that has ever happened to me. What happened to you was terrible but it happened to me too. Losing you, getting you back, watching you nearly die - it happened to me, too. Are we still in this together? It feels like I'm in it, but you're gone. Don't leave me in this shit alone, Harry. Please. Don't.

Okay, that's all of my angry words. If I was there, I'd just give you a slap and it'd be okay, but I'm not there and I don't even know how your edges are. I think you're probably all edges. Zabini says you've not written back to him either. (Don't tell Ginny but I've seen him a few times. Turns out his Mum has a house in the south of France too. How many houses do you think the Contessa has??) Whatever is going on, remember it wasn't your fault. I'm glad Remus and Snape are there. Hopefully, they'll keep you safe and keep the edges soft.

France is good. After the funeral, Bill came and had a chat with my parents. He suggested they think about moving out to France more permanently, which is sort of good because Mum has been looking for any excuse to get Dad to retire early. She's going to do a Masters in Fine Art at the University of Bordeaux. Dad's a bit put off by the idea that I could be in so much danger, but Bill explained all about the House of Potter and the protection the goblins can give me as your sister and they've arranged all that, so he feels better. We've been here a week. We've been talking about switching me over to Beauxbatons if I have to. I've been hanging out a bit with the Delacour family. Zabini introduced me, he showed me around the magical quarter in Bordeaux which is fascinating and Fleur's nicer than I thought. Smarter, too. She's doing a Mastery with Gringotts in Runes. Did you know that Beauxbatons has one of the best Runes NEWT instructors in Europe?

I've not seen Ron or Ginny since the funeral. There's some talk about me coming back to London if you're there, but I don't know if you even will be. Bill told me that Remus might take you to Italy. That might be better, Harry. It might be safer. Maybe everything would be safer if we'd just left long ago.

I miss you so much. I love you so much. I want to kill you a bit, or lock you up in a tower and make you read books and tell you over and over that it's not your fault and protect you from all the edges, but I can't. You're there and I'm here and I miss you.

Talk to me, you dick.

Love, your sister always,

Hermione.

"Fuck," Harry groans, putting his head in his hands. He feels like he is trembling all over. The world is lurching and all the worst things are true. *Arthur is dead and it's my fault. They feel abandoned and it's my fault. Sirius is dead and it's my fault. Lucius Malfoy is Minister and that's my fault too, everything is my fault.* Hermione is always right. *Maybe everything would be safer if we'd left long ago.* Harry breathes deeply and then, instinctively, has an idea. "Kreacher?"

The elf appears with a scowl, rubbing his hands on a tea towel.

"Treacle tart is not ready yet."

"Not that," Harry swallows and looks up at the slowly emerging stars. "Can you ... can you do me a favour?"

"Depends," Kreacher says.

"On what?"

"On how many dizzy sweets Master has."

"Sweet Jesus," Harry mutters. "One bag and you have to make it last a week. I can't get Fred and George to send me any more without Remus noticing."

"Kreacher agrees," Kreacher smiles nastily. "What does Master wish?"

"I need ... I need you to go to Hermione," Harry mumbles. "I need you to tell her that I'm sorry, I've just read her letters and I will write back but she just needs to know that I do love her and I'm ... I'm so sorry."

Kreacher looks at him, frowning.

"Master's Potter sister is angry with Master for not writing letters?"

"Yes," Harry mutters.

"Master has ignored Potter sister's letters?"

“Yes.”

Kreacher stares at Harry for a moment then pops away. Harry waits, staring at Hermione’s words. *Don’t leave me in this shit alone, Harry.* The trouble is, Harry feels completely alone. Even Hermione’s words are just like shards of ice, stinging him brutally, but they don’t touch the core of him. The cold, lonely core. *The part of me that’s still in the cage.* Harry wonders if he will always be there. Suddenly, Kreacher is back. In the blink of an eye, he’s hitting Harry around the head with a tea towel.

“Hey, hey!” Harry exclaims, ducking his head. “What the fuck?”

“Is not Kreacher,” Kreacher smiles cruelly. “Is from Master’s Potter sister.”

“Well, that’s fair I guess,” Harry looks at Kreacher nervously. “Does she say anything else?”

“She will come to Rome after the end of Master’s exam.”

“She will?” Harry swallows down his nerves and feels a flowering of excitement there. *Hermione.* He’ll see Hermione. It’s an excitement that is only mildly tempered by terror. *She might beat the crap out of me with Hogwarts: A history.*

“Yes,” Kreacher smiles. “But if Master does not write back, she gives Kreacher permission to beat him with towels.”

“Okay,” Harry nods.

He looks out to sea. He needs to fix it. He needs to fix everything. *It feels like I’m in it, but you’re gone.* Harry needs to find a way back to himself, hates himself, violently, for the trembling fear inside of him. For the cold place that nothing touches. Horribly, it’s Tom’s voice that pops into his head, memories sparking nastily through his brain as they do all of the time at the moment: *You despise weakness maybe more than I do. We are fruit fallen from the same tree.*

“*Am not,*” Harry hisses to himself. He swears he can hear high pitched chuckling inside his mind.

Right then. I’m sorting this out, right now. Fuck you, Tom.

Before he has a chance to doubt himself, Harry is standing up and walking down to the edge of the sea, Kreacher stumbling on the shingle beside him.

“What is foolish Master doing?”

“I’m going in the water.”

“Lord Prince says Master can’t leave the wards.”

“Well, how far do they extend?” Harry asks, standing at the edge of the ocean. Kreacher sighs and clicks his fingers. A shimmering wall of light appears out in the sea, glittering in the low light of the evening.

“Master does not know how to swim,” Kreacher scolds him.

“I did alright in the second task,” Harry grumbles, pulling off his shoes and wiggling his bare toes in the rough sand.

“Master was part fish, of course he did,” Kreacher snaps.

“Look, if I seem like I’m drowning come in after me,” Harry wriggles out of Remus’ yellow jumper and pulls off his trousers until he’s just standing in his boxers and t-shirt. The skin on his arms pimples in the cold breeze from the water. *I will not be weak.*

“Kreacher will not,” Kreacher looks at the water as if it might bite him. “Master will drown.”

“Fine,” Harry rolls his eyes. “Master will drown then.”

“Why does Master want to go into the horrible ocean now?” Kreacher grumbles, folding Harry’s clothes.

“I’m testing a theory,” Harry says, striding into the water, wincing as the cold water slaps against his bare knees. Tom’s voice echoes in his head: *your weakness sickens me.*

“What theory?” Kreacher croaks loudly behind him but Harry doesn’t answer. Tom’s there, answering inside his mind, his cold voice in the cold cellar: *You are pathetic. Even before Bellatrix set her knife to you. You are falling apart.* Harry is going to do what it takes to pull himself back together.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Broken Glass

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation)

This week, Harry has feelings. Next week, Harry has Theo!

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

Harry walks out into the ocean until it's around his cold knees, flinching as sharp stones dig into the soft soles of his feet. His right ankle is still wrapped tight, a support bandage to help him walk and now it is a heavy wrapping around his foot. Harry stares down at the water and closes his eyes, feeling his chest constricting as memories surge up inside him. *The Ministry. Pulled under. Cold. Bitter tasting.* Harry feels the urge to get out of the water, it presses up against his cold calves to his knees, a fluttering to rush away but he digs his toes into the gritty sand. He will stand here. He will bear it. He will swallow down the sickness and bile rising in his throat. He will not be pulled down by these memories. *Don't leave me in this shit alone, Harry.* He will not let it happen. He will not let Hermione or anyone else down. No one else will die on his watch.

Rising water.

Cold.

Bitter.

I don't care.

Can't breathe.

Can't swallow.

Dark.

I don't care.

Teeth. Claws.

I don't care.

Wet hair.

I don't care.

Sirius.

It's no good. Harry can't breathe. He stumbles in the water and for a minute he's under it and then he's not. The wet sand is under his knees and his hands and the water is all around him in a ring of frothing waves. In the twinkling sunset in the foam, he thinks he sees the eyes of Death and the swish of the Grim's tail.

"Jesus," Harry coughs out water. "Just show the fuck up if you're around, Padfoot."

Nothing happens. Harry closes his eyes against the salt spray and the wind. Sirius' words from inside the veil. *You're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry.* Harry does not feel like a lynchpin. He feels like a failure and Sirius is dead. Padfoot might be the Grim but Sirius is dead. No matter what Harry is, if he's a Mage or a Necromancer or whatever, he can't call the Grim to him. Padfoot might be in his dreams and in the moonlight and shadows, but he's not really here. Not like he was beyond the veil when Harry could hug him and feel so safe and loved without the ache of the parabatai bond. It's crushing, that realisation and Harry gasps with it. *Nothing is really here like it was there.*

"Come out of the water, Master!" Kreacher calls.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry sighs. He staggers to his feet, wincing on his sore ankle and staggering out of the sea. Kreacher scowls at him and snaps his fingertips. A warm towel appears around Harry's shoulders.

"Why did Master do that?" Kreacher tilts his head in a mix of curiosity and irritation.

"Because," Harry shivers, "I wanted to see if it was still scary."

"Master and his foolish theories," Kreacher snarls. "Master should come inside."

"I'm going to sit for a bit," Harry plonks himself down on the stony rise of the shore, blinking at the splash of a yellow and pink sunset.

"Kreacher shall make hot chocolate," Kreacher grumbles.

"I'm okay."

"Master will have it."

"I don't need hot chocolate, Kreacher."

"Master walks into the ocean for no reason to prove to himself if water makes him scared," Kreacher snaps. "Master will drink it."

"Fine," Harry rolls his eyes and pulls the towel closer around his shoulders. "I'll have hot chocolate."

"Yes, Master will because Kreacher says so," Kreacher mutters. He clicks his fingers again and Harry's damp boxers are replaced with dry ones. It's a nice feeling, and he contentedly pulls his tracksuit trousers back on, listening to Kreacher trek back up the shingle to the cottage. "Is Master still scared?"

Kreacher's voice drifts back from the top of the beach, a few feet away. Harry sighs. Hears Tom's voice in his head. *You are broken, you pathetic thing.*

"Yeah," Harry mutters. "Fucking am."

There is quiet, only the sound of the wind in the long grass on the dunes. Harry can feel Kreacher watching him.

"Master will have the chocolate," Kreacher says. Harry hears his small feet pattering on the flagstone path from the dunes across the garden. Harry sighs and stares down at the stones between his legs, trying to breathe as deeply as he can, as deeply as Severus has been trying to teach him, but it's almost impossible. He feels like he did after Bellatrix cut each of his ribs. Like each breath is sharp and agonising. Sirius is dead. Arthur is dead. Cedric is dead. His Mum and James are dead. The list of people standing in front of wands for him has only grown and he's had enough of it. He's had enough of his rage, the liquid fury he feels cold in his blood for Bellatrix, who betrayed their magic and killed Sirius. He's had enough of Tom's voice, of dreams full of memory and nightmares full of screams.

Death's voice whispers in his ear: *Their destinies are their own.*

It's not fucking enough.

Harry's gaze finds a bottle and wiggles it out of the stones, rolls it between his two hands and then, staring at his bandage, he carefully unwraps his left hand. It looks, quite frankly, a fucking mess. The skin on his stump of a finger is itchy and flaking, still dark with dried blood and healing cuts. His hand still trembles when he stretches his fingers. The marks of Bellatrix's manacles have faded around his wrists and ankles and stomach, the one around his throat is the most persistent and oddly, the scars on his elbows won't fade. *So fucking ugly*, Harry thinks, using his strong right hand to press the bottle against his weak left hand. *So fucking ugly*. He doesn't even have to think about it, the magic in his Black diamond shatters it into large pieces, a shower of glass winking in the sunset.

"Shit," Harry mumbles, instinctively trying to gather the pieces up as if it matters that he broke a bottle he found on the beach. One of the pieces is so sharp it slices the pad of his right index finger. Harry sucks in a breath. "Shit."

He stares at the blood on his finger, a droplet welling up out of the ridges on his fingers. He feels a twitch of panic in his gut, feels a knife scratching against his ribs. He remembers Tom's voice, low-pitched and hissing and full of curious fascination: *If you were mine, then you would be unblemished*. He feels the squirming, sickening feeling again, the feeling of being the centre of Tom's attention. Like a butterfly pinned through the heart. The helplessness is stone in his stomach, poison in his veins and Harry decides something right then and there.

I won't be his unblemished thing.

Harry lifts the sharp piece of glass, holds it between his bleeding finger and his thumb, and presses it against the wounded palm. It's so fucked up already, that it barely matters. It won't be worse, it can't be worse than what he feels already. It can't be worse than the feeling that Bellatrix is over his shoulder, that her breath is mingling into the exposed bone of his hand. Besides, he can't go on like this, panicking like a freak every time he sees blood. He imagines how that will go down at Hogwarts, every time MacLaggen gives him a bloody nose. The shaking. The weakness in his arms

and legs. It'll be worse than his fourth year when Malfoy was giving exclusives to Rita Skeeter.
Mentally unstable.

I won't be the freak again.

The glass rips through the firm skin of the muscle of his thumb. It's not as deep as Bellatrix's knife or as smooth, but the pain is the same and Harry smells it. The blood. The cold of the cellar. The sweet, sickly scent of Bellatrix's magic. It's all still there, Harry can't get away from it, so he digs the piece of glass deeper. Maybe if he does, then the cellar will go away and he can here, truly here, instead of half there and half beyond the veil. Maybe he'll see the blood here, dripping onto the stones, rather than seeing blood on Kreacher, blood on his hands, blood on the floor of the cellar. Tom's voice is inside his head when he took Harry's mouth and Harry's body and wrapped him in scales made of bone, impossibly strong, as he took Harry to pieces.

You were always broken, Harry and now you are mine.

"*Fuck off, Tom*," Harry hisses in a broken voice, digging the piece of glass in even deeper. How deep would he have to go to cut Tom's voice out of his mind, out of his memories?

"Harry."

Harry turns. Remus is standing behind him. Harry freezes, staring at his godfather. In the dying light of the sunset, Remus' amber eyes move slowly between the piece of glass between Harry's fingers, pressing firmly into Harry's left hand. Harry expects an outburst, expects sadness because he did promise Remus that he would talk to him if he ever felt exactly this way. Remus does none of those things. He sits down beside Harry on the pebbles, the stones crushing together under his weight and sighs.

"Did it help?" Remus asks quietly. Harry takes out a long shuddering breath and drops the piece of blood glass on the stones with the others.

"Not really," Harry mumbles. "It's all still here."

"What is?"

"The cellar," Harry grunts with the pain of it against his ribs, squeezes his hand, the sharp cut in his hand pulling him back. *She's not here. I'm not there.* "The blood."

The cold part of me that won't leave that place.

"Ah," Remus takes Harry's wrist gently, his thumb stroking Harry's rune marks. "So that's why?"

Harry nods numbly.

"Because you see the cellar when you see blood? And it frightens you?"

"It doesn't - Jesus Christ," Harry takes a deep breath and drops his head down between his knees, struggling to catch his breath. "It's this! I can't ..."

It's everything, it's Bellatrix, it's blood, it's pain, it's fear and it's Tom. Always Tom. *If you were mine ...*

"Shhh, it's okay," Remus rubs Harry's back slowly. "Breathe."

“It’s not okay,” Harry chokes in between sharp breaths. “I bleed a lot, Remus, I bleed so fucking much, my scar, quidditch, Cormac Mac-fucking-Laggan, how can I live my life if I freak out like a bloody idiot every time I see blood?”

How can I possibly survive Voldemort if I panic whenever I see blood?

“You’re not freaking out,” Remus says softly. “You’re having flashbacks, Harry, it’s -,”

“Do not say the word ‘trauma’,” Harry snarls, lifting his head to glare at his godfather. “Because I swear to God, I do not care if you’re a werewolf I will fucking kill you.”

“It’s normal,” Remus smiles. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“Normal,” Harry shakes his head bitterly.

“Yes, normal.”

“Well, I can’t be normal,” Harry mumbles, pressing his face into his damaged hand and smearing blood across his cheek. It doesn’t stop. In his mouth, he can still taste the sickly scent of Bellatrix’s magic. “I can’t feel this way.”

“You won’t, not forever,” Remus strokes his hair tenderly. “It will pass.”

“When?” Harry chokes out.

How does having Tom look at me that way, dreaming about him, Sirius being dead, Arthur being dead, Cedric being dead, how does that pass?

“You can’t rush healing,” Remus leans back on the stones on his elbows, staring out at the ocean. The final dregs of golden sunshine spread out over the dark grey and blue water. “That’s something our family healer told me the first time I transformed.”

Harry looks at Remus, at the many scars he can see on his arms where his robes are pushed up.

“How old were you?” He asks quietly.

“Four.”

“Four?” Harry feels a sudden wave of nausea. “That’s so young.”

“It is, it is very young to feel as if you are dying,” Remus says quietly. “But I think you know something about that, Harry.”

Harry scowls and stares at the water as it pulls closer in, drawn by the tide, by the moon.

“You’re talking about the garden,” Harry says eventually. Of course, Severus will have told him. “The cold night.”

“They left you outside to die,” Remus says. There is an edge to his voice that Harry can’t miss.

“No, they just ... left me outside,” Harry shrugs. “They didn’t care what happened to me.”

“Greyback did not intend to leave me to die,” Remus says levelly. “But turning a child into a werewolf aged four is extremely life-threatening. So is leaving a five-year-old out in the freezing cold.”

“Greyback did it?” Harry’s stomach swoops painfully. He remembers his vision, the claws and the blood. “He was in the vision Voldemort sent me. That day.”

“I’m not surprised,” Remus sighs. “Fenrir would very much like me dead.”

“Why?” Harry whispers.

“Because I refused to be his,” Remus says simply.

“I don’t understand.”

“I can explain,” Remus sits up and looks at Harry levelly. “If you let me wrap your hand up for you again.”

Harry looks at the slow dripping blood down his arm, at the wound on his hand that he keeps unconsciously squeezing as if to make sure he feels the pain. He nods at Remus stiffly. Remus gently takes Harry’s hand in his, reaching for the bandage which Harry left on the stones, and, muttering a cleaning spell, begins to re-wrap it.

“Werewolves traditionally move in packs for safety but many people perceive that as a threat to both muggles and Wixen. Here in the UK, creating or following a pack is illegal, it is why so many werewolves leave the country,” Remus says quietly. “Life is better in a European pack than living as an outlaw or alone.”

“That’s so shitty,” Harry winces as Remus gently wraps the cut and his blunted half finger.

“It is,” Remus says. “Greyback is a pack leader. Unlike other pack leaders in the world, leaders who gather wolves together to create families, Greyback likes to make his family from scratch. He bites children. British children, and then, because he knows that they cannot live a fulfilling life without a pack here, he waits until they are ten or eleven, if they survive, and takes them from their families.”

“So he’s a kidnapper,” Harry says, staring at Remus’ calm face and soft hair.

“No,” Remus shakes his head sadly. “Many parents let him take their children. Let them go willingly.”

“Who would do that?” Harry’s voice is shaking. His whole body is shaking. “Who abandons a kid like that?”

Remus looks at him cautiously, amber eyes gentle.

“I could answer for you, Harry, but I’m worried it wouldn’t help with what you are feeling,” Remus ties the edge of Harry’s bandage and then takes hold of his right hand gently, murmuring a cleaning spell over Harry’s bloody fingers. “Your abandonment was a terrible thing.”

“They all are,” Harry’s voice is coming out harsher than he meant. “Either every time a kid gets abandoned is terrible or none of them is.”

“Yes, they are all terrible but they are not all terrible in the same way,” Remus’ voice is very even. “Can I explain?”

Harry doesn’t know why this suddenly feels so difficult, why his lungs suddenly feel stretched and tight, all at once. He nods mutely.

“I am the only werewolf child to attend Hogwarts,” Lupin says softly. “Not because I was special or better than the others. I was the only one of my generation still living with their parents in the UK. Some werewolf children have family friends who can take them to other countries, who can send them to be schooled in places that have less prejudice to creatures, like Durmstrang for instance.”

“Really? Durmstrang?” Harry asks curiously.

“They educate all creatures the Ministry considers dark,” Lupin nods. “Vampires, werewolves, daemons ...”

“How did you end up at Hogwarts?”

“Because I stayed with my parents,” Lupin smiles. “Most werewolf children are sent to pack at eleven, rather than school. Some go to packs on the continent, in places like Romania or the Ukraine where the packs are largest, but a British werewolf child is likely Greyback’s and will find their place in one of his packs here.”

“You said it’s illegal,” Harry says.

“It is,” Remus nods. “It is dangerous. It’s a life on the run, a life hiding a part of yourself from everyone. Fenrir has fathered nearly every single British pack. He does not run with everyone now, he’s off somewhere in Europe, no doubt at Voldemort’s bidding, but they all will follow if he asks.”

“So he came for you?” Harry whispers. “Before you got your Hogwarts letter?”

“Yes.”

“How did you say no?”

“No was all I had to say,” Remus’ face looks pained for a moment. “Wolves mature much quicker and when we are young, we are sometimes our most vicious, especially at that age when our accidental magic is so volatile. It’s why he takes them then. To mould them.”

“He was scared of you?” Harry says in astonishment. Remus shrugs, a little modestly.

“My mother was an extraordinary witch. My father was a magical scholar. I had their power and I wanted to learn, so, so badly. That desire made me fierce,” Remus says softly. “I wanted to learn to be smarter than anyone else and for that to be the thing they said about me. Not that I was some filthy half-breed.”

Remus looks wistful for a moment, staring over the darkening ocean. This is a man, Harry thinks, who has survived much more than anyone expected. *Like me*. Harry links his fingers with Remus’, squeezing slightly.

“You are so fucking cool Remus.”

Remus snorts with laughter and shakes his head, leaning his shoulder on his knee and his head on his hand to smile at Harry fondly.

“I am, am I?” He teases softly.

“You’re brilliant,” Harry says firmly. “You are smarter than anyone else. By, like, miles, and Theo says you’re a doctor.”

“I have a doctorate,” Remus corrects, with a half-grin.

“Yeah, Shadowman says it’s not as good as a Mastery but I think he’s jealous,” Harry shrugs. Remus and Harry have taken to calling Severus the Shadowman between them, code from their letters spilling out into the real world. Besides, Harry is still getting used to actually calling Severus by his first name anywhere outside of Harry’s own head.

“Shadowman says, does he?” Remus smirks with a smile he only has when speaking about Severus. Harry doesn’t quite get it. He knows his Sire and his Godfather are sharing the only other bedroom when one of them is not checking on him, but Harry has deliberately not spent any time thinking about what that could mean. *Nope*. “Well, Severus was exactly what I wanted when I was eleven. I wanted to be academically challenged. Dumbledore wanted to make a statement of inclusion. It worked out. For a while.”

Remus’ face takes on a particular expression that Harry can always pinpoint to a time, place, or person: School days, Hogwarts, Sirius. He swallows hard. He cannot bear to bring up Sirius now. Sirius who, even on the other side of the veil, Harry couldn’t find it in himself to forgive. *I knew it would hurt more on this side. I just didn’t realise how much more.*

“So your parents didn’t abandon you then?” Harry asks, pushing on.

“No, but only because I refused to go and that had its own consequences,” Remus’ eyes are full of pain and hatred. “Greyback killed my parents when I was in my early twenties after Voldemort fell.”

Harry doesn’t ask why. If Greyback is anything like Voldemort, then he likes revenge, especially on people who deny him what he wants. He also knows that if Remus is anything like Harry, he thinks it’s his fault and nothing Harry says will make that better.

“That sucks,” Harry clumsily holds Remus’ hand. “But why did they want you to go with him?”

“Some parents think it will be better, it must be better, for the child to be with their own kind and Greyback, unfortunately, is the only British werewolf offering a home on this island. These parents are utterly without the power to help their children. With you, it was different.” Remus’ eyes flash gold for a second and he looks at Harry seriously. “When you were abandoned, it was by people who were supposed to protect you, yes, but by people who also had the power to give you a better situation.”

“You’re talking about Dumbledore,” Harry mumbles.

“I am,” Remus says coldly. “And myself.”

“You didn’t know, Moony,” Harry squeezes his hand.

“That does not matter,” Remus says firmly. “I let myself be swallowed up by self-pity, by the belief that I am somehow less than capable of providing a Wixen child a home because I am an inhuman Creature.”

“You’re not,” Harry says automatically.

“You don’t have to deny it,” Remus says softly. “I am not strictly human.”

“Yeah, obviously, but neither am I,” Harry rolls his eyes. “What I mean is, you’re not less than capable of raising me.”

“Neither are you what?” Remus looks at him quizzically.

“Strictly human. Wixen,” Harry digs his toes into the shingle, he feels like he’s flushing. Maybe Remus hasn’t actually realised this yet. Harry feels like he’s been carrying it since his conversation with Luna at the funeral. *Everyone you love will die and you will live to see it.* He’s different. He knows it now more than ever. “I’m not a Wixen child, am I? I’m a Mage.”

Dangerous. Necromancer. Murderer. A freak.

“Creature father for a Creature child, I reckon.”

Oddly, Harry doesn’t stumble over the word. He remembers how horrible it felt when Severus used it the night of the legilimency. *I still wish to be your father.* With Remus, however, it’s easy.

“Creature father for a creature child,” Remus swallows hard. Harry sees his eyes flicker golden for a moment.

“That okay?” Harry flushes harder and looks down at his cold feet. He holds Remus’ hand extra tight. He remembers Severus’ face from those memories of that night, the way he held Harry’s Mum close and whispered: *I need to forget this.* He knows what it’s like to be rejected by one father already.

“Yes,” Remus whispers. He pulls his hand away and suddenly wraps his arm around Harry, pulling him close. Harry turns his face into Remus’ shoulder, breathing in the woodsmoke scent of his magic, and sees moonlit trees in his mind. Remus’ magic is soaring, vibrant, and full of victorious howls and Harry’s heart races with it joyfully. “Although I have no idea if the Ministry of Magic would designate you as a Creature.”

“I’m not looking to find out,” Harry snorts.

There is a whistling silence between them. The sucking sound, the grand rattle of the ocean water pulling back to the great sea. Gently, Remus holds Harry even closer and strokes his bandaged hand. Harry looks at it. Hears Hermione’s words in his head. *I reckon you’re all edges.* He realises he will hate to tell her that she is right, because if she’s right, then he has let her down. *You are broken, you pathetic thing.* Maybe he is too broken now.

“Do we have to tell anyone?” Harry lifts his hand and the blood seeps through the bandage. “About this?”

“The Shadowman has to know,” Remus says immediately. Harry is completely unsurprised by this yet it is still a deafening blow to his chest. He immediately hears Severus’ words when he first

came around from the deep place. *Value Life.*

“Okay,” Harry swallows. He’ll deal with that when it comes. “But ... I don’t have to tell anyone else?”

“Next time you feel like you want to hurt yourself, you’re going to tell me,” Remus says softly. “Me or Severus.”

“Okay.” Harry sighs and rubs his nose against Remus’ robes. “But you’ll keep it a secret, okay? That I’m feeling ... the edges?”

“Of course,” Remus hesitates. “You don’t want to tell Hermione? Or Theodore?”

Harry says nothing.

“Harry, they’re your best friend and your boyfriend -,”

“Not my boyfriend,” Harry mumbles into Remus’ robes.

“What exactly are we calling the boy you’re soul bonded to?” Remus says, his voice a little sharp. Harry knows how he feels about the bond. *Ambivalent at best* is how Theo puts it.

“Theo,” Harry scowls. “We’re calling him Theo.”

“And you don’t want to tell your Theo?”

Harry thinks of Theo’s messages nearly every hour. He thinks of the way Theo wept into his hair when Harry woke up. Theo killed someone for Harry. Theo thought he was dead. Theo is terrified he will die again. Harry can’t make any of that worse by admitting that, sometimes, he wishes he had. Not to mention Hermione, who is, by rights, fucking furious at him and also, at the same time very worried he will jump off the nearest tower.

“He’s so worried, Hermione’s so worried,” Harry whispers, watching as bats begin to swoop low over the foam. “I can’t.”

“They love you,” Remus kisses the top of Harry’s head. Harry feels himself sinking into Remus’ warmth, tiredness edging towards him. “But it’s your choice.”

“I just ... I want to get better first,” Harry mumbles.

“You can’t rush healing,” Remus whispers back. “They want to help you heal.”

Tom’s voice inside his head: *I can make you strong. Come with me and be remade.* He feels the soft scales of Sahara as she coils herself up around his wrist.

Where were you? He asks sleepily inside his mind.

Hunting. I felt your pain.

I’m always in pain.

Because you are shedding, Sahara slides up his wrist to his neck. Harry feels Remus stiffen and then relax when he realises what it is, pulling Harry even closer. *You are becoming yourself.*

Harry wishes, not for the first time, that who he was, in the beginning, was just fine enough because this changing stuff seems suddenly pretty shit and a lot of effort.

“Chocolate is ready,” Kreacher croaks behind them.

“Come on,” Remus says, pulling Harry to his feet. There is no word in the English language more likely to move Remus Lupin than this one, Harry thinks. “Chocolate.”

Later, Harry sits in his room and writes his letters. With Hermione, he keeps it very short. *I love you, I'm sorry, I'll do better. I can't wait to see you next week.* If he writes anything longer he might lie, and he doesn't want to lie. It's too tempting to say 'I'm fine,' and Hermione will never forgive him. He opens a letter from George that had arrived when he came back from the beach. A couple of curly wurlies and fizzing wizzbees fall out. Harry smirks and skims it.

Hey, milord

(It's too much fun to keep calling you that). An update for you: Fred and Zabini's list of Bear Wands treaties is only growing, I will send you the complete list when I have it. Fred and Zabini have entered into an 'arrangement' as Fred calls it. It involves so many dirty limericks, Harry, I don't know how you put up with it in whatever fake arrangement you and Zabini have. He's made words rhyme that I can never un rhyme. Here are some muggle sweets (and some fizzing wizzbees that we have 'adapted' - try them if you dare!) I'll send more next week to wherever you are. I hope it's fun! We're living in the shop now, which suits us. Bill is just around the corner with Tonks, and Fleur Delacour stays with them whenever she comes to the London bank for work. She's kind of cool, Fleur, she and Hermione seem to be becoming good friends. I know Hermione's only just broken up with Ginny and Zabini's always flirting with her but maybe it's something. When I saw her last, Fleur had one of Hermione's books. She said Hermione loaned it to her when they met up in Bordeaux. I'm not gossiping but ... means something, right? (Who am I kidding, I'm TOTALLY gossiping. Also, heard that Wood hooked up with the new beater for the Holyhead Harpies - intense right? But Oliver always had a thing for someone who could beat the living crap out of him).

Let me know what sweets you want next. Tangfastics are awesome, by the way. I don't get why Haribos have egg-shaped sweets that don't last like eggs. What's the point of that?

George Weasley

Guardsman to the House of Black

Harry smiles. Hermione's mention of Fleur already had his mind ticking over but George is right, it definitely means something. He wonders what book she loaned. *If it's Hogwarts: A History then she's definitely in love.*

“What sweets did guardsmen send?” Kreacher croaks. “Kreacher must try.”

Kreacher is sitting on the top of Harry's trunk, mending a pair of Harry's socks. Harry's not told him what happened on the beach but Harry's sure he knows, because since they came back inside either Remus or Kreacher has always been in the room with him.

“Alright, on your head be it,”

Harry throws a fizzing wizzbee at Kreacher who catches it on his tongue. Harry watches as his whole face crumples up like a baby trying a lemon for the first time, and he levitates a foot off the

ground. When he resettles, he shakes his head like a dog and fixes Harry's hand with a hungry gleam.

"Very good, Kreacher will have more."

"Your head will explode." Harry tosses him another one anyway.

He leans back against the wall by his bed, practising the summoning charm by hissing "*come*" in parseltongue and watching various objects flying towards him from around the room as Kreacher chomps and levitates, occasionally hissing like a snake with the sourness of the sherbert balls.

"Master will need to say actual words to pass his silly exams," Kreacher mutters, watching as a mended pair of socks zoom towards Harry, licking sherbert off his face with a long tongue.

"I can obviously do it with words, the first task, remember?" Harry says.

"Master believes his skills to be so legendary even house elves hear of it?" Kreacher snarks, stabbing his needle into Harry's socks.

"Fine, watch." He points Sirius' wand at his journal, which is resting on the top of a stack of old cauldrons. "*Accio* journal!"

His journal flies into his hands. He sees Theo's words forming on the open page. His usual hourly message.

Are you okay?

Harry hesitates. He sees Kreacher pause in his sewing to stare at him. Harry pulls the dicta quill out of the seam of the journal and sets it on the paper where it hovers. His right hand is doing a lot better, his handwriting is just about as legible as it's always been, but after writing his letters his grip is poor. A dicta quill will have to do.

"I'm fine," Harry says. "Just revising."

Kreacher snorts and shakes his head.

"What?" Harry demands, closing the journal.

"If Master thinks Heir Nott will not find out, Master is an idiot," Kreacher mutters.

"Shh!" Harry whispers, gesturing to the door. He can hear the front door opening and closing. Remus is making tea in the kitchen. Severus must have got back from Edinburgh.

"How is he?"

Those are the first words out of Severus' mouth. Harry scrunches his face up, bracing for it. *Here we fucking go*. He can't make out Remus' low murmur in return, no doubt Remus knows he will be listening and doesn't want Harry to hear his description of their evening, but Harry hears Severus' pitched low response, voice dangerously slick, soft as velvet:

"Excuse me?"

Harry winces. That's not good. *I'm in so much fucking trouble.* The two men in the kitchen descend into hissing whispers, a fight pitched at the lowest level. Then louder.

"You're pretending to do *what* with Narcissa?" Remus' voice, a growling shout through the wall. It seems Remus is not the only one giving unpleasant news.

"*Your nest mates are loud,*" Sahara hisses.

"*Go out if it bothers you,*" Harry hisses back.

"*I shall sleep.*"

Sahara twists around his neck invisibly, removing her fangs from where she has been sipping away at his blood, her scales hiding the bite marks and tucks her head under his nose. Harry begins to point Sirius' wand at different items, thinking of the word '*Accio*,' inside his head but it doesn't work. He hisses in irritation and then, pointing the wand again, thinks the parseltongue word '*come*' in his head and a grimy potions vial flies onto the bed beside him. *Huh. Weird.*

"Wordless summoning charms are actually NEWT level, you understand."

Harry looks up. Severus is standing in the doorway, one hand resting on the doorframe and his eyes on the potions vial.

"It's parseltongue," Harry mumbles, face going red. "Probably doesn't count."

"I believe it does," Severus says. His face is studiously expressionless. Harry realises he has no idea what Severus will do about anything he heard from Remus. That's unnerving. Harry decides to get out in front of it.

"I know, I know," Harry mutters, pressing the button on his wand holster and shooting Sirius' wand back into it before pulling his jumper down over his hands. "Value life."

Severus simply looks at him for a moment, his long fingers tapping against the chipped wood.

"May I come in?" he asks, abruptly.

"Sure," Harry shrugs uneasily. Severus moves into the room. He is still wearing his travelling cloak, rain-soaked on the edges, and he carefully sits down on Harry's bed, pulling the damp hem away from the sheets.

"May I please examine your hand?" Severus asks. Harry should have known this was coming so he tries not to flinch and nods, holding his hand out. Severus takes hold of it and unwraps the bandage, looking at the deep wound made by the piece of glass. Made by Harry. Harry doesn't know where this is all going. Any second, he expects to be berated for not valuing his own life but Severus doesn't seem to be preparing to do that. "You mentioned that the Black magic is healing magic?"

"What?" Harry stares at him in astonishment. "Um, yeah. It is."

Severus nods and then sets Harry's palm flat on top of his own.

"Heal it," he says, nodding to the band of silver on the underside of Harry's first finger that emerges from the flesh, unable to be pulled away.

“I don’t - I don’t know how,” Harry stammers.

“Just try,” Severus says softly.

“I ...,” Harry looks down at his hand, at the raw gash and reaches for the Black magic. He thinks of its soft wings and feels the white light of it chill his hand, but nothing happens to the cut. Inside his mind, the voice of the raven caws: *Your desires are ours, child of Black.*

“Why does it not work?” Severus asks, and Harry knows then that somehow Severus already knows the answer. He sighs inwardly. *Of course.*

“Because I don’t want it to,” Harry whispers, clenching his fist.

“Why?” Severus queries. Harry rolls his eyes and scowls fiercely, pressing his hand against his leg only for Severus to gently take it away, holding him loosely by the wrist. “Harrison?”

“Because I want to be hurt,” Harry mumbles, glaring down at the cut.

Severus nods solemnly. He then pulls a familiar violet glass tub out of his robe pocket, smearing the purple paste around the edges of Harry’s cut. Harry winces as the skin tightens, drawing back together.

“You have significant power within you,” Severus says quietly.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Harry mutters, rolling his eyes.

“I do not speak of your magical capabilities, Harrison,” Severus rubs his thumb against Harry’s in slow, careful movements. “I speak of your resilience.”

“Resilience?” Harry barks harshly. “I’m a fucking mess.”

“Language,” Severus intones. Harry rolls his eyes again and watches as Severus’ strong fingers rub gentle circles around the healing cut. “I drank.”

“Huh?” Harry looks up into Severus’ face. His darkens are fixed on Harry’s hand.

“I lost someone ... very important,” Severus’s voice is slow, his hands rubbing Harry’s wound even slower. “The desire to self-destruct was all-encompassing. I drank.”

“Someone,” Harry’s eyes drift to where Severus’ dark mark is hidden under his many layers. He remembers Severus’ hissing, snarling confession to Sirius in Grimmauld Place. *I took the Mark to keep him safe, I would have married him had he lived and when he died I perished.* “Sirius’ brother? Regulus Black?”

Severus’ fingers pause for a moment. Then he nods stiffly. His fingers begin to work the cream into Harry’s hand again.

“I drank,” Severus repeats quietly. “To cause myself a pain that I could comprehend easier than the loss of him.”

Harry doesn’t say anything. A year ago, he would have scoffed at the idea of Severus Snape ripped to shreds by grief, but Harry’s seen how Severus grieves. He saw the broken young man on the

floor of Godric's Hollow inside Severus' memories. He heard the wail of a shattered heart. Harry knows that wail and how it feels when it is dragged out of your chest. *Cedric*.

"Self-destruction is understandable," Severus continues, "perhaps even natural, but you have the power within you to heal as well as destroy, Harrison. When you are ready, it is within you."

Harry looks down at his hand. Hears Tom's voice. *I shall take every moment of pain and turn it into fury*. The cold, hopeless place at the centre of his being hasn't thawed.

"What if ...," Harry swallows, "What if the bit that wants to - to destroy stuff is stronger?"

Severus looks up at Harry, eyes sharp.

"It may be stronger than your desire to heal, but is not stronger than you, *farzandam*," Severus' voice is a low rumble. Harry feels his Prince tethering tightening. *It is not stronger than this*. He remembers Severus' words in the nothing-place. *You will survive*. "Do you understand me?"

Harry nods tersely, staring down at Sirius' wand inside his holster. Sirius is dead and his wand feels that way. Lonely. Empty. So does Harry. Tom's voice again: *You've always been broken, Harry, and now you are mine*.

"Yes," he says hoarsely.

"Good," Severus pulls back from Harry's touch and stands up. "There are rules."

"Rules?" Harry looks up at him quizzically.

"Yes," Severus nods. "Lupin thinks that imposing rules on you will seem restrictive but I shall not dance around the obvious. You are a potential danger to yourself."

"Oh, come on," Harry rolls his eyes.

"You may be churlish about it if you wish but it shall not change the facts," he continues. "So you will come to me before you hurt yourself again. Day or night, any place, you will call for me."

He looks significantly at the tether between them that only they can see.

"I'm not going to do it again," Harry mutters.

"I do not require you to make such promises," Severus shakes his head. "I only require you to adhere to the rules."

"Remus says I could tell him instead," Harry counters.

"You may, but be assured if you tell him I shall be there within a minute," Severus says smoothly.

"Right, co-parenting, got it," Harry mumbles, picking at the hole in his jeans. "That it?"

"You shall be accompanied at all times for the next week," Severus says flatly, pointing at Kreacher who nods, ears flapping firmly. "Lupin shall speak daily about your mental state."

"He does that already," Harry grumbles.

“Then it shall be no hardship. Lastly -,” Severus presses his hand against the door. “This shall remain open at all times.”

“At all times?” Harry scowls. “What about if Theo comes to stay?”

“Especially if Theodore comes to stay,” Severus drawls. “At all times means at all times.”

“You don’t trust me,” Harry folds his arms and glares at Severus.

“I trust that you do not have current intentions to take your own life,” Severus says steadily. Harry feels his stomach flip. *Current*. Severus will never forget the Astronomy Tower, Harry knows he will never let it go.

Is he wrong to do so? Sahara hisses into his mind.

Harry does have an answer to that. Only one thought, scattering through him, as fierce as the moment the glass pierced his hand: *I will not be Tom’s unblemished thing*.

“I do not trust that, whilst overcome with any number of emotions, your turbulent magic may cause you more harm than you can stand or I can repair,” Severus continues.

“So you trust me, you just don’t trust my magic?” Harry surmises angrily.

“Harrison, it is not a matter of trust, only of appropriate caution when faced with untested magical capacity,” Severus sighs, rubbing his forehead. Harry wonders suddenly how his meeting with Narcissa went. Badly, if the bruises on Severus’ knuckles are anything to go by. “All we are trying to do is keep you safe.”

“From myself,” Harry mutters darkly.

“There are occasions when we need assistance in balancing the destruction inside us,” Severus leans against the doorframe. His eyes are tired but they sparkle with the same coal-like surety Harry has seen in them every day since Severus took him from Grimmauld Place. He remembers, suddenly, what Severus said when they returned to the house so Harry could barter for Arthur’s life when they shared secrets on a slow walk up the stairs. *You will live, Harrison*. “Will you allow me to do so?”

Harry stares at his Sire. Hears Tom’s voice inside his head: *I feel the violence inside you. How can you not be mine?* Harry swallows hard.

“I’ll try,” he whispers.

- - - -

Dear Ron,

I'm sorry I didn't write back. I'm sorry about your Dad. Things have been kind of shit here, but funny too. Sahara likes having the space, she and Hedwig hunt together (I think Sahara's finally got big enough that Hedwig doesn't think she could take her anymore and I've finally convinced Sahara that she's not allowed to eat my owl) and they leave dead voles all over the window sills. It drives Snape up the wall, which is hilarious, and now he's determined to make some kind of use of them in a potion. So he's pickling them in jars which makes Remus sick and Kreacher keeps

breaking into the jars and snacking on these dead, vinegary voles! Remus and Kreacher are also in an all-out war over the kitchen. Remus doesn't cook or anything, but he makes soooo much tea, and he leaves the tea bags all over the sides. Or at least he did. I thought Kreacher was cleaning them up when he grumbled about it, but yesterday, Remus found ALL of his used teabags. Kreacher put them between the pages of his books! They are COMPLETELY tea-stained and fucked and Remus growled at Kreacher and I think he's planning some kind of Marauder-Esque response because all of the jars of pickled voles have gone missing. Kreacher is so mad and Remus looks smug. Snape says I shouldn't get involved and I'm not going to, but it's pretty funny watching it play out. I'm not drinking any tea until it's all sorted, because I just know Kreacher's gonna do something foul to the teabags. I thought you'd find it funny. My hand is okay. Getting better. Nightmares are shit though.

I hear you're hanging out with Luna. I just want you to know, I think that is great. Luna is so class, I fucking love her. She always knows what to say, even when it's weird. I hope she's helping.

How are the Canons doing?

Love you too,

Harry.

Dear Gin,

Of course, you're still my dragonet sister. You can both be my sisters. I love Hermione, obviously, but I love you too. Yeah, definitely go out for Seeker or for Chaser this year, you can use the firebolt either way if Ron doesn't want it for Keeper, it's his now. As a seeker, I think you're in with a chance. Chang is probably the best flier out of the other Seekers, but her broom holds her back. It doesn't dive well, so if you stay high and keep her following you, you'll always have the advantage. Smith is showy and likes to spot you close, keeping the tail bristles tangled, if you get my drift, but this means he's always more focused on you than the snitch. So if you let him stay close and then pull fast, the acceleration on the firebolt's much better than his broom. Easy peasy. Malfoy is a pain in the ARSE to play because his team do everything to keep him safe and clear to fly, but the good thing is, he's not as good as his team or his broom. He relies on them to make it easy and keep you busy (watch for sideswipes and not just bludgers, their Chasers will throw a quaffle at your head if they get a chance) but if you can keep your head in it and see the snitch first, you've got in the bag. His broom isn't as fast and his reflexes are shit, so just stay on your broom long enough to see the snitch, and you'll be fine.

I reckon Katie will make Captain this year. If she does, she'll want to keep your Seeking, but remember, if you want to Chase, then you Chase. Don't ever tell Ron I said this, but it's only school Quidditch. The thing I miss most about flying isn't the winning, it's the thrill of it. Of seeing Katie, Angelina and Alicia fucking killing it when their passes are so fast, of diving into the path of a bludger and knowing Fred would be there, of seeing Wood making an impossible catch with a roll no one expected. Of chasing the Snitch right past Flint's ugly nose and knowing I wouldn't hit him, even at 70mph. I miss the flying, Gin. So don't do what'll help you win. Do what'll make you happy. There. That's my big brother speech over with!

It's cool that you're thinking of hanging out with Dean. Football: Yes, there's only one ball, there's only one hoop (it's a net) there's no bludgers, no snitches, and everyone runs everywhere. Basically, it's like if you played Quidditch with just the quaffle and one hoop and it was EVERYONE's job to get it through the hoop. And you were all on the ground. And there were no brooms. That's football.

Also, football chants and songs are so much more imaginative than Quidditch ones. Enjoy that! Wear claret or sky blue and eat a pie at halftime and share it with Dean. He told me once that his ideal date would be that. Also, ask him this question and he will do anything you want: "Can you explain the offside rule to me?" Try to look interested in the explanation. (It's not interesting).

Love you too, Gin.

Your youngest biggest brother,

Harry

Zabini,

Thanks for the heads up about Theo. I will definitely see you in Rome next week. I expect you to be extra annoying, as promised. Also, I know we can't fly in the Castello, (and I can't fly anyway) but Remus says we can play football in the Courtyard. Would you be into that? I can teach you. My ankle's healing and I think I could score some goals. I need to move, I've been still for too fucking long, and Remus thinks that exercise might help with revision. What about you? Are you healing up?

Don't call me 'my lord,' it's totally weird, but thank you for guarding Theo as you do.

H.P-B.

George,

Thanks for the fizzing wizzbees! Kreacher loves them. Can you send more? The reason that Haribo doesn't taste like eggs is that would be fucking disgusting. Why do wixen love horrible-tasting sweets? Sweets aren't supposed to be a punishment! Good to know about Mi and Fleur, very interesting, do you know which book it was? Content matters here, Weasley. I also have a very important question for you, George: How would you know what Wood likes? How would you know he likes beaters? Is it because YOU are a beater? I have a theory ...

Don't call me 'milord' it makes me sound like I keep peacocks and look down my nose at muggle-borns. Wait, why does that sound so familiar? (Malfoy, cough cough)

Thank you for being such a great Guardsman. Thank Fred for me too.

Harry

Mi,

I'm in this. I promise. You're my sister. You're my best friend. I love you. I'm sorry. I'll do better. I promise I'll do better. I can't wait to see you next week.

I love you so much,

Harry.

-- -- --

I answered my letters.

I'm glad. Are you okay?

I will be tomorrow.

I am looking forward to seeing you too.

How are you feeling about the funeral?

I will be fine.

Are you sure?

I will be tomorrow.

I love you, Theo.

I love you, Harry.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

A Pyre in Ireland

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation)

The update schedule is changing. From now on, you will receive updates of shorter chapters on Fridays and Tuesdays. Enjoy!

Today, Theo and Harry are together. Next time, Theo faces the past.

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

Harry dreams.

Or maybe, Sahara does. Harry's not sure. He sees them again, the three people in the folly. The dark-faced Mage, the green-eyed Sorceress and the pale-skinned Fae. He sees the way Morgana frowns when Nimue speaks, how Morgana's wand is easily held in her fingers with a natural ability Harry recognises from someone else.

"No, she is the Sorceress," Nimue says to Morgana and then looks at Merlin. "You are Mage."

Sorceress. Morgana twists away in his dream and suddenly, he is seeing Theo's memories. Sees Theo's scream, him fighting brutally to be free of Apollonius' arms so he can follow Harry through the veil. Harry sees the way Theo kills Lestrage, the quick efficiency of the knife across the throat. The blankness in Theo's eyes, deep whirlpools of grief. Then, just as fast, he is Cedric. Cedric, lying dead in the graveyard, eyes blank and cold.

Harry gasps awake. There is a firm, dry hand against his forehead.

"Wake, *farzandam*."

Harry does, stares briefly into obsidian eyes and smells wood smoke, sips a potion. Then he is in the dream-not-dream place.

He sees the three points of light, one afire, the other two smouldering. Death stands by his shoulder.

"You are worried about your sorcerer," Death says.

"Can you help me keep him safe?" Harry whispers. Padfoot pushes against his leg as if to remind him of something. He can't recall what it is.

"That is not what I do, Master."

“Okay,” Harry nods. “Thought I would ask. I’ll do it on my own.”

“That is not what you do either, Master.”

“It is,” Harry says firmly.

“Maybe now,” Death’s eyes are unfathomable. “You are formed for other things.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Harry stares at the flaming points. Oddly, he longs to touch them. “Is it to do with Mages?”

“It could be. It is to do with you and you are a Mage,” Death shrugs. “But you are also more.”

“How much more?”

“All things in their time, Master.”

What am I made for if not to protect people? It feels like it’s the only thing Harry’s been made for. The Boy-Who-Lived. Harry’s always wondered if he was incorrectly named. After all, how much of him survived that night? He lost everything.

"I'm the Boy-Who-Lost so everyone else would win," Harry murmurs.

"Many have lost, many will lose," Death strokes his hair back from his face. "We remain."

“ Do you remember the other Sorcerer? Morgana?” Harry asks, thinking of Theo.

“I remember everyone,” Death holds his hand tenderly.

— — —

Harry holds Theo's hand as they watch the flaming boat burn on the water of the lake.

"Do we need to say anything?" Harry asks quietly. Theo asked that they do this alone. Severus and Narcissa are waiting back at the castle. Theo's eyes are fixed on the burning wood containing Apollonius' remains.

"No," Theo shakes his head. "I do not think there is anything to say."

Harry considers the crackling wood and the body hidden inside it. He wonders how he would feel if it was Vernon since Vernon is probably the only comparable figure. Except Vernon would definitely be improved by a sudden death by snakebite.

Your grey one asked me to bite him, Sahara hisses into Harry’s mind.

I’m glad you did. He was a bad Sire.

You both have bad Sires.

If you say that to mine, he'll turn you into potion ingredients.

"In my culture, we burn corpses because we think the smoke helps the soul carry on," Theo's voice is steady but cold. "I don't know if I wish that for him."

"Was he always crap?" Harry asks, brushing the toe of his trainer against the sand. "Your whole life?"

"Not always, not before Mother died," Theo blinks fast. He's squeezing Harry's hand tightly. They've not seen one another for over a week and Theo doesn't seem able to let go of Harry, not that Harry minds, even if the short walk down to the beach from the castle and pushing the pyre out onto the water has taken all the energy he has. Last night he dreamt of Tom. He knows because Severus woke him up and Harry is pretty sure that the first thing he said was "*He's keeping me caged.*" This is probably why Severus has told them that if they are not back in twenty minutes there will be hell to pay. Hell, in this sense, is probably what will happen if Severus tells Kreacher Harry has worn himself out.

"Let's go back to the castle," Theo says.

They walk up the pebbled lane from the private beach, Harry limping slightly on his sore ankle. Through the slim trees and up to the castle, with the smoke of the burning boat floating with them on the wind. It's beautiful, the forest denser and greener than it is in Skye.

"I've never been to Ireland before," Harry says quietly.

"You've never been anywhere."

"True. Unless you count the other side of the veil."

"Prick," Theo snorts, nudging his shoulder against Harry's and then, suddenly, spinning him around and pushing him up against the nearest tree. Harry grunts as Theo's mouth presses firmly against his, Theo's hands on his hips, holding him in place against the rough bark. The bond flares into life around them, a cocoon of blue and gold light. Theo breathes out, pressing his forehead against Harry. "It's still here."

"It always will be," Harry says hoarsely.

"You're magic has changed so much, you lost the Slytherin magic, the Potter magic -,"

"Yeah, but this is us, Theo," Harry thinks of the birds he saw when Voldemort possessed him. Blue eyes, gold wings. *His magic and mine.* "It's our souls, right? It's ... it's always us."

As Harry speaks the bond swirls even closer to their skin, and Harry swears that he can see wings in it. Theo leans back and looks up at it curiously.

"Sorry," Harry whispers. "My magic's been a bit all over the place since ..."

Since I woke up from the Deep place. Since I became Lord Black. Since I killed someone with a Patronus and met Death. Since something at the core of me is as cold and raw as the day Cedric died.

"It's fine," Theo strokes Harry's throat, his fingers grazing over the slight bump of the pink skin still healing from Bellatrix's collar and drifting down to Harry's rune mark. "Hurricane me?"

“Not now.”

Harry kisses Theo chastely. He needs to avoid hurricanes. He knows Theo wants it, he knows Theo has been missing him and needing him and Harry feels the same too, but something is holding him back. He doesn't want Theo to see what happened beyond the veil but he knows he won't be able to keep it back in the whirling openness of the blood magic. Especially not now, when he sees Death's hair floating in the corner of his eye in every waking moment. There's also the matter of Sahara drinking his blood whenever she likes and the fact that Harry's been having horrendous nightmares. Then there's the thing with the glass on the beach last night. *I will not tell him about that.*

“Harry,” Theo presses his forehead against Harry's, his breath sweet and gentle. “Tell me.”

Harry breathes in the scent of Theo's magic, mead and heavy rain in summer. In his mind, he sees golden-winged birds with blue eyes.

We don't have secrets, Theo's thoughts echo through the bond. Harry sighs heavily.

He remembers Death's voice in his not-dream-dream. Harry doesn't care what she says. He'll protect Theo from this for as long as he can.

“Not secrets, Theo, just ...” Harry presses his nose against Theo's cheek. *Negahbane raaz.* Guard the secrets. Far away, Harry hears Sahara's voice in his head. She might be in Scotland and he's in Ireland but they're never apart.

Do you guard things from your mate?

The things that hurt him, yeah, I do.

“Just what?” Theo asks.

“Just ...” Harry takes a deep breath. The air is full of Theo's magic, sweet and strong and perfect. It's the most real, the most here he has felt since the funeral, since he woke up. *Since I came back through the veil.* “All things in their time.”

“What does that mean?” Theo whispers back.

“It's something I heard,” Harry swallows. “Beyond the veil.”

Theo's fingers dig into his hips for a moment and he drops his head to Harry's shoulder, breathing deeply and hard. The blue light in the air around them intensifies and Harry smells lightning in Theo's magic. Harry waits for Theo to speak, but he doesn't. Harry realises something and understands the reason behind Theo's sudden, furious kiss: Theo does not like him talking about the veil. *He's scared of it.* Harry threads his fingers through Theo's hair. *Why would I tell him things that might hurt him more?*

“*Mine,*” Harry hisses softly, trusting the parseltongue to flow through the bond. Theo sighs and his thoughts spill into Harry's mind.

I can't lose you again.

“You won't,” Harry kisses Theo's soft brown curls, rubbing circles on Theo's back. “There's just a lot of stuff now, Theo, a lot of new stuff to deal with.” *Necromancer. Death. Tom. Feeling like I'm losing my mind. The edges.* “It's going to take time.”

Harry feels a ghostly beast rub past his leg. *Padfoot*. He does not even know how he will begin to explain that. Let alone that Sahara seems to dream of people who are long dead.

“Can you give me some time?” Harry whispers into his ear. Theo shudders softly and surges his lips up suddenly, capturing Harry’s mouth and Harry breathes in sharply through his nose as firm hands cup his face and Theo’s firm thighs push him back against the tree. *Oh shit*. Harry forgets that he’s hurt and tired and bone-weary of this world on the side of the veil without Sirius or the Black Prince or the Slytherin magic or the Potter magic. He doesn’t know how weary he is until Theo kisses him just like this and it all falls away. They’ve kissed before, they’ve kissed fiercely, but this is different. It doesn’t thaw the cold place inside Harry, but it does something. Something melts, just slightly, like the edge of frost on an iceberg. The bond that glitters around them pulls closer, pressing against their skin like hot air and Harry tries not to think about how much better, how it would be a *million* times better if they were wearing fewer clothes, just less, less of everything -

“We could be,” Theo murmurs, sliding his hands down to the hem of Harry’s t-shirt and Harry realises that he must have been leaking his thoughts to Theo through the bond. *Well shit*. Harry’s eyes dart to Theo’s face for a sign of teasing or humour but can see none. *Holy shit, he really wants to take my clothes off*.

“Um, yeah,” Harry whispers breathlessly, thinking that this is the best idea that anyone has ever had ever. “But, like, my sire and your guardian are right up there ...”

And Severus will flay you alive. Harry doesn’t know what Narcissa would do but it would probably be worse.

“Are you trying to be sensible, Potter?” Theo arches an eyebrow.

“First time for everything, Nott,” Harry snorts, shoving Theo gently in the shoulder. “We should go up.”

“As you wish,” Theo presses soft lips against Harry’s with a tenderness that makes him feel like he has been hit with a jelly legs curse. “But I won’t forget.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” Harry jokes.

“Promise,” Theo murmurs, kissing Harry’s rune mark in a way that has Harry hissing through his teeth. Why is it that this particular patch of skin feels so alive to Theo’s lips and Theo’s tongue? Why does it make Harry want to lean his head back and let Theo kiss him absolutely everywhere? *Stupid Severus. Stupid Narcissa. Why couldn’t they trust us to do this alone?* “Come on.”

Harry glares at Theo as he pulls away, holding his hand out with a slightly smug expression as if he’s read Harry’s mind in his bruised lips. Harry takes his hand and grumpily lets himself be led up the twisting path.

“You’re mean,” Harry mutters. Theo merely smirks at him, slipping his fingers between Harry’s, his thumb absentmindedly tracing the Black ring. Harry knows he doesn’t mean anything by it, but for a cold second, memory sears across his brain. Teeth, her literal, horrible teeth, gnawing at the flesh of his hand. Harry takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. *Drown it. Don’t panic, you fucking moron*, but he can’t move.

“Harry?” Theo asks softly, slowing his footsteps. “You okay?”

Harry shakes his head. He leans his back against a tree and tries to fight it, tries to pull the not-caring up from somewhere but the not-caring wasn't built for this shit. It's like trying to fight a basilisk with a spoon. *Or just a bloody sword, come to think of it.*

"What's wrong?" Theo asks urgently. Harry sees the same panic in his eyes that he saw in the hospital wing.

"*Nothing,*" Harry says, except he doesn't say it, he hisses. His voice has disappeared. Theo looks at him, eyebrows raised slightly then his eyes widen.

"This is ... a panic attack," Theo says delicately. Harry's heart constricts. Oddly, it's Severus' voice he hears. *Oh, forgive me for suggesting the Boy-Who-Lived might struggle with his mental health.* He shakes his head violently and tries to breathe.

"Then what is it?" Theo rubs his hands up and down Harry's arms like he's trying to warm him up.

"*The cage,*" Harry hisses. He can feel it, he can actually feel it now, the cold stone against his back, against his throat. Theo looks stumped for a glorious second and then realisation splits across his face. It takes on a determined look that Harry associates with one moment in particular: Theo starting Vernon's car.

"Come here," Theo pulls Harry into his arms, squeezing him tight, pushing the breath out of him. Harry struggles for a moment, Theo's arms too strong, too tight, suddenly too muscular and solid, too much like a cage. Harry is keeping his body rigid to try to stop from shaking. *I'm fine, I'm not broken, I'm fine.*

"Don't fight it, I read this is good for panic attacks, just breathe," Theo grunts, his voice a tight whisper.

"*Can't,*" Harry hisses back, voice broken, straining and tense inside Theo's arms. *The stone wall behind him is locking him in place. Bellatrix's fucking teeth, her teeth in his skin, against his bone, the worst feeling in the world.*

"Come on, Harry, it's okay," Theo's breath is warm on his neck and his voice is plaintive. Harry remembers that tone, so tender and desperate, from the hospital wing. Harry's heart surges with despair. He's making that voice happen, he's creating that sadness in Theo. *Ugly, horrible, ungrateful freak.* "What can I do?"

"*Just .. Talk to me,*" Harry hisses, trying to breathe through the trembling he is hiding in his bones. He will do this. He will control himself. He will not let someone so lovely be pulled down into the vortex of whatever hellhole exists inside Harry's mind.

"Have you ... have you heard of the Tuatha De Danann?" Theo asks quietly. "They are legendary on Sherkin Island."

Harry shakes his head, breathing as deeply as he can. He hears Severus' voice inside his head. *Breathe, farzandam.*

"The muggles still tell stories about them. The earliest documents record them as being very skilled in magic, banished from heaven because of their knowledge and descending to Ireland in a cloud of mist and driven away by the Milesians, muggles from Iberia." Theo whispers. The sharp pain and

the sensation of something gnawing at Harry's hand recede as he listens to Theo's soft voice. "Now I think they could have been Mages."

Harry breathes slowly, letting his limbs soften against Theo's. He closes his eyes and sinks into the scent of Theo's magic, the syrupy taste of it that today is like honey on his tongue. Inside his mind, Harry sees golden wings.

"*Could have been,*" Harry hisses. "*Maybe there were other Mages besides Merlin and Dee.*"

"The Tuatha De Danann would have predated Merlin," Theo says. "Let's sit."

Theo keeps hold of Harry and they slump together, down onto the pine needles, Harry still held in Theo's arms.

"If what we know about Merlin is true, then there are similarities in the abilities."

"*Yeah? Could they speak to magical objects?*" Harry hisses, thinking about his dream of Merlin speaking to the magic in the sword.

"No, the Tuatha De Danann could do elemental magic and could shapeshift, which is something Merlin was known for. Why would you say that about magical objects?"

Harry hesitates, but he supposes that of all the terrible things he's holding back right now, this is the least weird.

"*I ... dream of them. Merlin and Nimue and Morgana,*" Harry hesitates. "*The Mage, the Fae and the Sorcerer.*"

Theo is quiet for a moment.

"That's what Luna said to me," he says quietly. "When you were gone. That she was the Fae, you were the Mage and I'm ..."

"*Sorcerer,*" Harry hisses, pressing a kiss to Theo's cheek. "*Yes.*"

Theo looks at him steadily for a moment.

"I don't understand it at all," Theo says and Harry feels Theo's utter distaste at that. Harry doesn't understand it either, but the list of things he doesn't understand has only grown since the veil and it was a pretty long list beforehand. Theo isn't like that. Theo knows things, his mental library is ridiculous, Harry knows that all of this must be driving him crazy and that Daphne must be fighting every day to get Theo to leave the Greengrass library long enough to eat. Harry swallows hard and presses his hand against Theo's face.

"Neither do I," Harry croaks out in English, "but we will, one day, and we'll be together just the same."

He feels Theo's relief as his shoulders drop.

"Yeah," Theo whispers.

Harry rests his head against one of Theo's shoulders, pressing his nose against Theo's neck. Theo sighs and Harry hears his thoughts. *I love you, you insane whirlwind.*

“Rude,” Harry snorts, giving Theo a quick lick on the neck. Theo growls softly in reply. “I love you too, you idiot.”

Harry feels Theo gulp, feels his throat work against Harry’s lips. Harry looks up quizzically.

“You’re worried I don’t?”

“It’s just ... still remarkable to hear it from your mouth,” Theo mutters, twisting his head to kiss Harry’s curls. “Reading it is one thing but hearing it ...”

When Harry’s not looking at him, he still hears Theo’s voice the same way he did in the deep place. Sees blue threads tangling from Theo’s lips, through strands of Harry’s hair, winding their way down to the deep places inside Harry where the gold birds sing.

“Well, I do,” Harry pulls back and pokes Theo’s cheek. “So fucking much.”

Enough to be true with him? Sahara’s voice whispers inside him.

Enough to protect him, Harry thinks back fiercely.

Harry can practically feel Theo’s mind churning, even if his thoughts are not piercing enough or organised enough that they leak through the bond to Harry.

“Come on,” Harry groans. “Out with it.”

“How often?” Theo asks quietly. “The panic attacks?”

“Not all the time,” Harry winces, hedging his bets. It’s much easier to pretend he’s not really falling apart on paper when they write in their journals. Now Theo’s seen it, it’ll be harder to hide. Not that he’s hiding anything.

You are a liar, Greenheart, Sahara’s voice echoes in his mind.

Everybody lies.

“Is it always ...?” Theo’s voice trails away. *Embarrassing?* Harry scorns internally. *Pathetic?*

“I’m fine,” Harry says, unable to stop the sharpness in his tone. “Let’s go.”

He stands up and offers a hand to Theo, who stares up at him, silver eyes calculating.

“Harry.”

“It’s ... it is what it is,” Harry swallows hard. “Severus and Remus have it under control.”

And by that, I mean that they’re not going to let me out of their sight in case I hurt myself again.

“Okay,” Theo doesn’t sound convinced but he stands up. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wand. It’s Harry’s. He’s surprised by how lacklustre he feels to look at it. “Sorry I didn’t give it back to you in the hospital wing. I didn’t want to send it in the post.”

“It’s okay, I’ve not really been doing any magic apart from revision,” Harry confesses, sliding his wand into his back pocket. He doesn’t feel anything when he touches it. It just feels like wood. So

does Sirius' wand, which Remus has been making him use in revision sessions. Wands feel strange to Harry at the moment, and so do spells. The only thing that feels vaguely right is the Black magic and the tethering he has in the Prince magic. As he thinks of it, the bond around his wrist tightens softly.

"Yeah, apart from making bonds explode around us," Theo says sarcastically. "You're *always* doing magic, Harry."

"Yeah, Remus says it's annoying," Harry frowns. "He says I can't just keep asking the Black magic to do stuff with me."

"Yeah, I'm not sure what the examiners would make of that, Harry," Theo looks at him curiously. "Can the Black magic do anything you ask it, then?"

"I mean, it won't do things it doesn't like," Harry looks down at his bandaged hands. Feels soft feathers against his cheek. "It's tricky and finicky and sometimes a dick, but we can work things out. I just have to have a chat with it."

Harry swears he hears a dark, throaty chuckle. The Black Prince. Harry smirks to himself. *Yeah, talking about you, you legendary control freak.*

Harry feels a ghostly peck against his ear, a reproachful beak and shivers, glaring down at the Black ring.

"Will you behave?" he demands.

"Yeah, that's totally normal," Theo shakes his head ruefully. The words hurt Harry. He already knows how abnormal he is. *Necromancer. Mage. Murderer. Freak.*

"How am I meant to know if it's normal?" Harry scowls. "I've never been a fucking Lord, Theo."

The idea of the boy from the cupboard under the stairs being a bloody Lord is, quite frankly, ridiculous.

"Lordship magic usually only does certain things," Theo says. "It protects the family and maybe has one area it excels in. Nott magic is healing magic, Zabini magic is offensive ..."

"What's offensive about it?"

"Offensive as opposed to defence, Harry." Theo smiles and Harry feels stupid.

"Well, that's just bizarre," Harry mutters, flushing. "I mean, everyone says the Black magic is healing magic, that's true, but it's not all it does. That's like saying I'm just a seeker, even though I'm not anymore."

Harry feels a painful pang of sadness for Quidditch. Theo squeezes his hand again. The Black magic tingles up his elbow and suddenly, feeds into his mind an image of a raven soaring on a wing. *Freedom. Effortless. Beautiful.*

"Huh," Harry thinks. "Question."

"Oh dear," Theo gives him a sideways look. "Go on."

“I reckon ... I might want to be an animagus,” Harry sucks his bottom lip thoughtfully. He’s sure that he can sense the Grim prancing happily in the shadows under the trees at the idea.

“Of course you do,” Theo says drily.

“I’m serious,” Harry pushes into Theo with his shoulder. “I could fly again. The Black magic thinks it’s a good idea.”

“This is the magic that thought the right thing to do was have a diamond bursting out of your skin,” Theo lifts up Harry’s bandaged hand. “Forgive my scepticism.”

“Oh really?” Harry raises his eyebrows. “Weren’t so suspicious when it wanted to kill Sirius over Yule.”

There is a tense second, the taut memory of Theo’s hatred of Sirius sitting between them.

“Oh, you’re right,” Theo muses sarcastically. “Illegal, under-aged animagus transformation, that sounds like a great idea.”

“Who says I’d do it illegally?”

“Everything about you should be illegal,” Theo leans over and kisses his cheek. “Absolutely everything.”

“Git.”

“Chaos demon.”

“Fine,” Harry huffs. “I’ll do it on my own then.”

“You will do nothing until we get back to Hogwarts and I can make sure you don’t turn yourself into a lion cub and cannot transform back,” Theo mutters darkly.

“A lion cub, really?” Harry grins. “That’s what you think my form would be? That’s sort of adorable.”

“Your form will be something annoying,” Theo grumbles, blushing deeply but wrapping his arm around Harry’s waist and squeezing him close. “How’s Sahara?”

“She’s fine.”

“She’s better?”

“Much.”

“Huh,” Theo looks at him shrewdly for a second. “I wonder why.”

Harry shrugs and makes non-committal noises. He’s been covering the bite marks on his neck with a glamour and hasn’t quite worked out what his explanation is going to be for why he is letting Sahara drink his blood daily.

Tell him I do it because I am made of what is yours, Sahara hisses inside his mind.

Or you're a vampire snake.

"Hmm," Theo says and Harry feels a swoop in his stomach. He could explain that somehow Sahara drinking his blood makes him feel more protective of her, which means that she can not only become invisible when she touches him but be unable to be felt by anyone else too. He could explain that he can hear her thoughts further away now, that he feels like if he had the Slytherin ring back he'd be able to summon her to wherever he was at any time, not just when he's just desperate. He doesn't think any of that will endear Theo to the idea so he keeps his mouth shut.

You cannot hide your truth forever, Greenheart.

I can hide it today.

Why?

So he hurts less.

We all hurt.

He's hurt enough, thanks.

Harry grips Theo's hand tightly. He will not let Theo be hurt anymore, he will not let him feel that same crushing despair Harry felt through the bond in the hospital wing. Harry will protect him from that.

You cannot be yourself without your true heart, Greenheart.

Harry doesn't know what that means so he ignores it. They come out from the woods, up the stone steps onto the back lawn of the small castle. Severus and Narcissa are sitting in the garden on an old rusted bench, talking quietly.

"They look cosy," Theo mutters.

"Don't remind me," Harry groans, shuddering to think about the first time he officially met Narcissa and her explanation about everything she and Severus have been to one another over the years.

"Oh really?" Theo raises an eyebrow. "Because you know there have always been rumours in Slytherin that the only reason Snape is Draco's godfather is because he and Lucius were *acquainted* back in the day."

"Jesus! Can you not?" Harry gives Theo a shove.

"Oh, is this because he's sharing a bedroom with your godfather?" Theo wiggles his eyebrows. "Or because everyone is saying that he and Lady Malfoy are having an affair?"

"Both!" Harry scowls at him. He does not think about what it means that Remus and Severus share a room. *Nope. Not happening. Not my business.* Theo grins playfully but doesn't retake Harry's hand, his eyes on Narcissa. Harry knows he's struggling to feel comfortable around her and they walk towards the adults, Severus stopping his conversation to rake Harry quickly over with his eyes, a slight frown appearing when his gaze flickers over Harry's swollen lips and mussed hair. *Irritatingly perceptive.* Harry raises his eyebrows and leaves a memory of Severus behind his eyes for the man to retrieve if he dares. *"I can't believe you and Remus gave Theo and me such shit*

about sharing a bedroom! Especially since you shagged Sirius' brother and -," Severus glowers at him but doesn't look away. He raises his eyebrows back, his eyes flicking down to Harry's bandaged hand. Harry knows what he means and, sighing, he allows thoughts to collect behind his eyes, easy for Severus Snape, the annoying Occlumens, to grab: *No suicide attempts, thank you very fucking much.*

"Good," Severus mutters, looking away. "And language."

"Do you need anything more?" Narcissa asks Theo quietly. Theo twitches. He's not used to Narcissa's tone, Harry can see that, but Harry knows Narcissa is being as kind as she thinks Theo can bear. He smiles at her quickly. *Thank you.* She nods almost imperceptibly and Harry feels a flicker of ice in the Black magic.

"Maybe thirty more minutes," Theo says, jerking his head toward the open french doors of the patio. "There are a few things I need to gather."

"Of course, take your time," Narcissa inclines her head.

"Theodore, there is something else that must be dealt with," Severus stands up slowly. Harry raises his eyebrows. "Will you follow me?"

Theo holds Harry's hand tight and doesn't let go as they all rise, and follow Severus into the dark, wood-panelled interior of Nott castle. On the table, there is an odd-looking jar, about the size of Harry's hand, made of clay, with strange etchings on the side. Theo gasps beside him and stops moving, staring at the jar.

"Is that ...?" Theo's voice fades away.

"It is what you expect," Narcissa says quietly. "Apollonius was thorough."

Harry looks at Theo urgently, sees how pale he is and how strong his grip on Harry's hand is and suddenly worries. *This is some bad shit we're into here.*

"What is it?" Harry demands, staring at Severus.

"It is a Canopic jar, it holds the memories of Apollonius Nott," Severus doesn't take his eyes off Theo. "Theodore must destroy it."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Apollonius' Secrets

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (PTSD/Depression)

This time, Theo fights grief.

Next time, Theo fights with Narcissa.

(for those of you worried about Theo and Harry, they are both grieving. They have some things to work through and they take their time doing it, but I promise you that in the 90 chapters I have planned, they always find a way through and back to one another. But they are also sixteen-year-old boys so ... y'know. It takes a boy a minute).

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

“Why do you have to destroy it?” Harry asks, frowning. Theo stares at the jar. It is possibly the most valuable thing Apollonius ever owned, yet it is so comparatively small and ugly compared to other items in his extensive collection. He feels like he’s gripping Harry’s hand tighter than he should be and Harry winces slightly, pulling away. Theo feels bad for his still-healing hands and wants to apologise but can’t take his eyes off the jar. “Theo, what’s going on?”

Even though I killed him once, I have to destroy the very last part of him.

“It ... he did it ... for me,” Theo swallows heavily. He finds he doesn’t have the words for this. Harry seems to sense that he’s not going to get any straight answers from Theo right now, so he stares between Narcissa and Severus.

“Tell me how this works,” Harry demands, in his typical Harry way.

“Canopic jars were used by the ancient Egyptians to contain the vital organs of the mummified pharaohs,” Lady Malfoy says. Theo is not surprised that she knows about Canopic jars. Almost every follower of the Dark Lord probably wishes for one.

“Gross,” Harry steps back, his hand gripping Theo’s elbow. Theo stares at the hieroglyphics on the side, wishing he could read them. Lady Malfoy probably can but he’s not inclined to ask her to translate. “Why did Apollonius have one? Is it, like, a weird Viking thing?”

“No,” Theo’s voice is hoarser than he means it to be. “It isn’t. Canopic jars are unrefined and brutal.”

So, of course, Apollonius possessed one.

“They are very complex magic,” Lady Malfoy says, and Theo bristles. Harry looks at him carefully, and Theo can tell Harry is sensing his distaste. His hand slides back down to link with Theo’s

fingers and Theo swears he feels a warm tingle of magic. It's around Harry all the time now, seeming to surge up under his skin. Theo doesn't know what it means but it makes him want to touch Harry's skin all the time.

"I don't understand, how can jars with old brains in be magic?" Harry frowns at the Canopic jar.

"Dark wizards used them as memory vessels," Snape says quietly. Theodore's not surprised that the most superior known Occlumens of his generation is aware of such ancient mind magic.

"So it is like a Pensieve? How can mouldy brains be memory vessels?" Harry stares at it.

"Because they contain the last memory of the person, their death," Lady Malfoy says. "Ancient Wixen used early arithmancy to produce an exchange - memories that they wished to hide completely, to remove from entirely from their mind, in exchange for memories of the death."

"The death is felt over and over until the user dies," Theo says, wondering what kind of death Apollonius had been dying for the last year. He doesn't know why, but he finds himself hoping it was quick. *Why do I hope for that? Why do I care if he suffered, after all the suffering he gave me?*

"Wow, that is so much darker than a pensieve," Harry mutters, staring at the jar with dislike. "Is it ... like, something people do a lot?"

"No," Lady Malfoy says. "The practice was outlawed."

"Another reason to be rid of it," Snape says quietly. Theo agrees with him but also sees a familiar glint of interest and respect in his Professor's eye when he looks at the canopic jar. Theo feels similarly. Even if it is illegal, even if he is repulsed by Apollonius using it, Theo would love time alone with the jar to study it.

"So what do we do?" Harry steps towards it with a very familiar look on his face. This is Harry's look when he's decided to 'do' something. "Smash it?"

Theo immediately shoots his hand out to grab the back of Harry's t-shirt, because he wouldn't put it past him to steam ahead and knock the jar off the table right then.

"Theodore must do it," Snape says. "Only the creators of the jars, the creator of the memories or ... the subjects of them can destroy the vessel."

"Then why bother?" Harry frowns. "Like, can't we just put it in a drawer somewhere?"

"It cannot be kept," Snape says.

"Why? We do loads of illegal stuff," Harry retorts, which Theo thinks is fair even if it is unhelpful. Snape scowls at him.

"We will not do this," Snape growls.

"Why?" Harry demands.

"Because the Egyptian magical government made a claim, quite rightly, on all canopic jars that were sold, stolen or acquired by foreign Wixen," Lady Malfoy explains. "It is not only illegal to purchase them, it is now illegal to possess them privately since by rights they belong to the

Egyptians and if Theodore is found to possess one, then not only will he face a prison sentence but once the Ministry realises that the jar has been *used* ...”

“They’ll destroy it,” Snape says.

“I thought you said only Theo or Apollonius could do that,” Harry frowns.

“The Ministry coordinate with the Egyptians, with curse breakers like Weasley,” Snape says. “They have access to the original spells that created these vessels, they have the ability to destroy them. They will see Apollonius’ secrets.”

“What would they see? Would they would see memories of you?” Harry looks at Theo, face spasming slightly with something Theo doesn’t recognise. He hates that there are expressions in Harry’s new repertoire that’s appeared since his coma that Theo cannot parse out yet. *Is it grief? What does that expression mean?*

“ I don’t know,” Theo says. He hates himself for it, but he looks at Snape for guidance.

“Likely, any memories that he had of your decision to align yourself with Harrison,” Snape says and Theo can’t help but glare at him. *Align myself*. They seem like foolish words for falling in love with Harry fucking Potter.

“What about the memories?” Theo asks Snape, trying to keep his voice level. “When I destroy the vessel what happens to them?”

“They disappear,” Lady Malfoy answers, her voice irritatingly gentle. “You may see flashes of them but it shall be over quickly.”

Theo hates her for knowing exactly the right thing to say. He stares down at the jar.

“How do I destroy it?”

“You can simply smash it, a *reducto* curse would do,” Snape says. “Upon impact, you may ... feel some discomfort.”

“What discomfort?” Harry snaps. Theo gives Snape a long look and understands.

“I might feel some of the original owner's death,” Theo says quietly. Now he really does care if the death was quick.

“No,” Harry says immediately. Theo feels a strange flush of delight as well as irritation.

“It’s fine,” Theo snaps back. After all, if Harry can experience the discomfort of some kind of half-death through the veil, Theo can endure this. He glares at Snape and Lady Malfoy. “Can we have some privacy?”

Theo notices the look that passes, no quicker than a millisecond, between them, and all of the silent communication that is accomplished at that moment. He has no trouble understanding why people are so quick to believe they are having an affair.

“As far as we know, a Canopic jar has not been used or disposed of since the late 19th Century,” Lady Malfoy says quietly. “You should not be alone when you do this.”

“I won’t be,” Theo scowls at her. “I have Harry.”

“Yeah,” Harry holds his hand tightly. “We’ll be okay.”

Snape and Harry stare at one another for a moment, as if a wordless conversation is taking place in the electric meeting of their black and green eyes. Theo doesn’t know what has happened between Harry and his Sire in the time they have been together in Skye since Harry’s coma, but Theo doesn’t like it. He knows it’s good, surely it has to be good that Harry trusts Snape more especially when he’s been so terribly wounded, but Theo feels a flash of irrational resentment.

“Call your elf,” Snape says abruptly. Theo doesn’t understand why but Harry nods.

“Kreacher!” He says and the elf appears. Kreacher looks around, bows stiffly to Lady Malfoy and scowls at Theo before fixing his eyes on Harry.

“Master called?” He snaps.

“Yeah, listen to Severus,” Harry says dismissively. Kreacher glares at Snape.

“We do not know exactly how the vessel will behave when it is broken,” Snape says slowly. “I suggest shielding it during the process.”

Kreacher looks at the Canonic jar and hisses.

“Evil jar,” he mutters, eyeing it carefully. “Very impressive.”

“Of course, you’d say that,” Harry rolls his eyes. “Why can’t I shield it?”

“Because you must watch Theodore for any symptoms,” Lady Malfoy says softly, “and call me or Severus if he is incapacitated.”

Theo knows that whatever happens, he will not call either one of them.

“Fine,” Harry nods and looks at Theo. “Shall we do this here?”

Theo nods.

“We will give you privacy,” Snape says, holding the door to back out to the garden open for Lady Malfoy.

“We shall be just outside, Harry,” she says quietly and Harry nods to her so easily, with such familiar trust. Theo knows that it’s something to do with the Black magic, but it is unsettling to him. *How can he trust her so easily after what her husband did to him?* Yet Theo finds he can say nothing. How can he deny Harry the people he trusts?

“Okay,” Harry says, stroking a hand down his back. “Are you ready to do this?”

“Yes,” Theo’s voice is firmer than he feels.

“Shield the jar, Kreacher,” Harry says.

“Not for free,” Kreacher croaks. Theo rolls his eyes but Harry immediately reaches into his pocket and pulls out a muggle chocolate bar. Kreacher sniffs it. “What is it?”

“A Kit Kat.”

“Not a twix,” Kreacher narrows his eyes. “Kreacher wants twixes.”

“Well I don’t *have* a twix,” Harry waves it in front of Kreacher. “Come on, I’ll give you another fizzing wizzbee when I get home.”

“Kreacher already ate them,” Kreacher grins nastily.

“You little shit! George sent them for me -,”

“Can we move this along?” Theo says. He’s ready now. He wants to get it over with.

“Fine,” Harry sighs and looks at Kreacher for a second, who grins. “I don’t have a twix but ... I do know where Remus keeps one of his chocolate stashes.”

“Kreacher knew it, Kreacher could smell it and the wolf keeps moving them,” Kreacher mutters and then fixes his eyes on Harry. “Tell Kreacher and Kreacher will help.”

“Deal,” Harry says.

“And Kreacher wants the Kit Kat,” Kreacher adds, snatching it from Harry’s hand.

“Fine,” Harry sighs. Theo stares at him in frustrated amazement, wondering how they ended up in a situation where they are little more than confectionary dealers for a house elf, but then Kreacher stands behind the jar on the table, his little ears poking above.

“Heir Nott shall cast and Kreacher shall shield,” Kreacher croaks. “Is Heir Nott ready?”

“Are you ready?” Harry asks gently, holding his left hand. Theo thinks that if he can watch Sahara bite Apollonius if he can feel the breath leave his father’s body and then watch his corpse burn aflame upon the water, then Theo can destroy a jar made of his secrets. *I can destroy the final piece of him.* He lifts his wand and points it at the jar.

“*Reducto!*”

The clay shatters, the shield erupts, wisps of memory that take no real form burst out and suddenly, Theo is bent double, an incredible pain in his chest.

“Theo! Theo, are you okay?” Harry is asking above him.

Drowning, Theo realises distantly. *The original death must have been drowning.*

“Oh, shit, shall I get Narcissa?” Harry says and Theo shakes his head angrily.

“No,” he gasps. The last thing he wants is the pity of Narcissa Malfoy.

“But you can’t breathe!”

“I’m - fine -,” Theo grunts out, still feeling as if a giant is sitting on his chest. He is gripping Harry’s hand tightly, trying to breathe through it, but he starts to wonder if it is possible and he might actually die like this, gasping under the invisible water of a death that isn’t his.

“Oh, fucking hell, let me - I don’t -,” Harry bends down, twisting Theo’s face up towards him. “I don’t know if this will work, but -,”

Harry kisses him. Theo knows, immediately, that this is different. This isn’t a hurricane kiss, this is more than a hurricane, and Theo doesn’t feel like he’s drowning anymore, because whatever is drowning him is being sucked out of him. It’s not a kiss, not about intimacy or desire, it’s like a spell, something that’s happening between them, a magical exchange. *I never want our kisses to be this.* The weight on his chest dissipates but he is suddenly dizzy, stumbling away from Harry and gasping for air, but this time, being able to taste it and feel it inflating his lungs.

“What the fuck?” Theo stutters when he can speak again. He looks at Harry who is wincing and rubbing his chest, eyes closed. When Theo touches his forearm to steady himself, he finds Harry’s usually warm, tingling skin is clammy and cold. *Like it’s been underwater.*

“Drowning, huh?” Harry shivers and winces. “Nasty.”

Theo suddenly understands and is livid. *You presumptuous, magically superpowered idiot.*

“You took the pain?” Theo clenches his fists. “Why the fuck did you do that?”

“Because you were dying,” Harry’s eyes are darker than usual and Theo doesn’t like it. “When I followed the blood magic with Sirius it, I dunno, kind of drained him so I just thought -,”

“So you thought you’d drain the magic out of me without having any idea of what it would do to you?” Theo feels like he is trembling with rage. Inside his mind, Theo sees Harry ducking under the veil, reckless and careless, following his godfather. “Are you fucking stupid?”

There’s a flash of anger in Harry’s eyes and then a second later, it’s gone. He shrugs and turns to look at Kreacher. Theo knows he’s being crazy, that today has already been much harder than he anticipated, but Harry’s nonchalance, his refusal to fight, just enrages him. He knows why, he knows Harry is trying to be respectful of what today is but that just makes Theo hate it more. *Be normal. Yell at me. Tell me I’m being a shit. Fight back. Stop trying to protect my feelings. Be normal with me.*

“Thanks,” he says to Kreacher. “Can you clean up the pieces?”

“Kreacher will make sure nothing is left,” Kreacher croaks. He snaps his fingers and suddenly the remains of the jar and the elf have disappeared. Theo’s rage, however, has not dissipated at all.

“Don’t do that again, Harry,” he says, trying to keep his voice level. *We are warriors, Theodore.*

“Do what? Save your life?” Harry snorts. “Give me a break.”

“Don’t take pain that’s meant to be mine,” Theo snaps. “He was my father, it was for me to endure.”

“That’s bullshit,” Harry says and Theo is aware that on some level, it might be, but it doesn’t stop it from feeling true. “You helped heal me a ton of times, you’ve saved my life over and over -,”

“That’s what I do,” Theo says. *I am a warrior. My óðr flames for Harry.*

“Right, so I protect what protects me except I’m not allowed to protect you?” Harry raises his eyebrows.

“One to talk,” Theo mutters. Harry is keeping things from him, Theo is sure of it. Harry looks at him with hurt eyes.

“You said you’d give me time,” he says quietly. Theo is instantly regretful. *He’s struggling. Snape barely kept him alive. Of course, he needs time.* He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The anger inside him is insidious, like the smoke inside a burning house, a silent killer. Yet it is so difficult to deny.

“I know,” Theo sighs heavily. *I love him. He’s been so badly hurt. I will give him what he needs, even if it breaks me.* “I will.”

Harry looks at him carefully and then nods, offering Theo his hand. He’s not apologised and he’s glad Harry hasn’t asked him to, because he doesn’t know what he would say. This is at least one of the best things about Harry. He doesn’t demand apologies that Theo isn’t ready to give.

“Did you see anything in the memories?” Harry asks, gesturing to the spot on the table where the Canopic jar had sat. Theo feels a swell of despair that he swallows down.

“No,” he says. He was a fool to hope for it but he had done so. He had entertained the possibility that he might see wisps of himself in the jar’s excretions, that he might catch a glimpse of a moment in his childhood, some evidence that there was at least something of Theodore that Apollonius had treasured. He had seen nothing. Even in his last memories, Apollonius was an enigma and grief was bitter. *I will not mourn for a reality that did not exist. He did not love me and now he is dead.* Theo pushes it all down inside and takes Harry’s hand. Harry is looking at him carefully.

“Sorry,” he says. Theo can tell he does not understand what he’s offering empathy for, but he offers it all the same. Theo gives him a tight smile. *I might be an orphan, but I’m not alone.*

“Come on,” Theo takes a deep sigh. The day is not over yet and he has one final duty to fulfill on behalf of the father who never loved him. “There’s something we need to find before we leave.”

— — —

Harry follows Theo further into the dark, wood-panelled interior of the castle. It smells of beeswax and dust. Harry has no idea how Theo can see or knows where to go in the darkness, but he takes Harry’s hand and guides him up a dark tunnel of a staircase. The light that falls down in thin strips is thick with dust. Harry holds his breath as he climbs.

“This one,” Theo says in a hushed voice. He takes the skeleton key from around his neck and sets it against the lock of an oak door.

“What bone is that made from?” Harry asks, queasily trying not to think of Bellatrix’s teeth.

“Likely human,” Theo mutters, not noticing as Harry winces. “It’s been in the family for so long.”

Theo pushes open the door. It creaks harshly as if it hasn’t been opened in years. They step inside. It seems like a normal bedroom to Harry, very elegant with a dark four-poster bed and matching, carved furniture. Theo, however, has stopped still in the doorway, letting go of Harry’s hand as he

walks to the window and traces his bandaged fingers along the grape and bird engraving in the wood there.

"My mother died in this room," Theo says quietly.

"Oh." Harry turns to look at Theo. He's not moved from the doorway. His face is open, more open than Harry thinks he's ever seen it, and there is a hint of a small boy inside it. The boy who lost his mother. *We both saw our mothers die in front of us.* "What do we need here?"

Theo looks down at the key in his hand, his thumb brushing against the bone key, formed with silver on the blade and ridges.

"Something that is locked," Theo whispers. Harry can see how little he wants to be here. Harry knows Theo's having a bad day, especially given the way he snapped at Harry about the stuff with the jar, but this is probably Theo's limit of time spent thinking about his dead parents. Harry decides to make sure it's as quick a process as it can be.

"Okay." Harry nods firmly. "You stay there. I'll find it."

Harry begins to search. He carefully tries the key in every cupboard, opening them and narrating what he finds; ("Linen, jumpers, bed sheets, books, Jesus Christ is that a stuffed pheasant?") Theo's face becomes more and more pinched as Harry opens the wardrobe that reveals a rail of robes, still drenched in a lily of the valley scent. Theo brushes his hand over them, silk and velvet and wool all in pale blues and greys that make Harry think of the sea he sometimes sees when he touches Theo's heir ring.

"What kind of thing would Apollonius send you here for?" Harry asks, lifting the window seat and finding only a sad collection of half-finished embroidery and half-painted landscapes.

"Not clothes," Theo says harshly, staring into the window seat. His voice becomes small again. "When she became ill she took up crafting."

"Except she wasn't ill," Harry reminds him quietly, closing the window seat. "She was poisoned."

Theo nods shortly. They've not talked much about Apollonius' last confession. Harry's not sure that it changes things much for Theo. The blame still seems to firmly be on Apollonius for letting it happen, which makes sense, but there's something about it that Harry doesn't understand, something hard and furious about Theo that is like a heavy rock between them: *don't take pain that's meant to be mine. He was my father, it was mine to endure.* Harry unlocks the bedside table and finds an unfortunate number of potions and vials of things, all smelling strongly of herbs.

"They're all out of date," Theo wrinkles his nose. "We should dispose of them."

"We could ask Severus to help," Harry says, dropping down on his hands and knees to look under the bed.

"Why do you call him that?" Theo snaps. Theo's been snapping a lot today. *Funerals for shit fathers do that.*

"What? His name?" Harry mutters.

"You called him Snape a week ago."

“Yeah, I still do, in public,” Harry huffs, crawling further under the bed and hearing a very familiar creak. “But you’re not exactly public are you?”

“Why bother?” Theo demands. “Come out, Harry, there’s nothing under there.”

“I think there’s a loose floorboard,” Harry mutters, pressing his fingers against the dusty wood before answering Theo’s question. “Because he helped keep me alive and why do you care what I call my Sire?”

“He just doesn’t deserve it,” Theo says. Harry can hear his derision all the way through the bed linen, bed frame, down to the darkness under the bed. It is suddenly very, very annoying.

“Like Sirius didn’t?” Harry can’t help but mutter. Theo’s feet stop moving. The floor stops creaking. Harry lets the silence build. If Apollonius pain was Theo’s to endure, why couldn’t Sirius’ have been Harry’s? *He gave me so much shit about taking pain for Sirius.* Oddly, it’s Tom’s voice in his head, remembered from when he had Harry wrapped up in the coils of his mind. *What would be justice, Harry?* Good fucking question, Harry thinks back, jamming his elbow onto the squeaking end of a floorboard. It springs up.

“Gotcha!”

“Harry?” Harry hears Theo drop to his knees beside the bed. “What is it?”

“Not sure, let me just ...,” Harry flexes his left hand, thinks of the twinkle in the Black Prince’s eyes and his hand glows like a torch, beaming white light out from under the bed.

“Couldn’t do a *Lumos*, could you?” Theo smirks and Harry at least feels a lightness in the tension between them. Harry ignores him and reaches down into the floorboard for a small box.

“Got something!” Harry calls, starting to wriggle back out. He feels Theo’s on his waist, guiding him back out and Harry rolls over, holding the box up to Theo’s face. “Here.”

Theo’s face pales dramatically, so quickly Harry thinks he might be about to faint, but he simply takes the box and sits heavily on the bed. Harry scrambles up and sits carefully opposite him, the box between them.

“Recognise it?” Harry asks. Theo nods dumbly. His shaking fingers trace the carved M and roses on the top of the mahogany. Slowly, Theo sets the key in the lock and turns. Then Theo stops. Harry sees his hand is shaking. “Theo?”

“I don’t know if ...” Theo whispers, his voice trailing away. Harry doesn’t need the rest of the words to understand. *I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I’m ready. I don’t know if this will hurt me and I cannot be hurt more today.* He puts his hand on top of Theo’s.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, rubbing his thumb over the back of Theo’s hand. “I’m here. I ... I love you so much and ... I’m proud of you.”

Harry worries that this won’t be what Theo wants to hear, he’s very spiky today, but Theo nods firmly and Harry knows he’s said the right thing. Harry tries to feed his love and pride in Theo through the bond, holding his breath as Theo lifts the lid of the box. There’s a small, black book on top which Theo takes out with shaky hands, letting out a tiny huff of surprise when he sees what is underneath. Photographs. Theo as a child, smiling and moving in the arms of a beautiful young

woman, (*Medea, Theo's Mum was called Medea*) and a smiling man that Harry would not recognise if he didn't know who it was. *Apollonius*.

"Oh, Odin," Theo breathes, picking them up slowly and touching his fingers against the surface of his mother's face. Harry sees a bright sheen of tears come into Theo's eyes.

"She was beautiful," Harry says, rubbing Theo's knee. He remembers how it feels to see photos of your parents, long lost. He remembers Hagrid gifting him the photo album in his first year. The photo of his Mum and James, twirling in the snow. He understands this feeling: *longing and love, completion and hollowness*.

"She was," Theo's eyes are greedy as he looks at her face. He turns the first photo and then the next and draws a sharp breath in.

"What?" Harry leans forward again. The photo is of a younger Apollonius, even more handsome, and a younger Medea, very heavily pregnant. Harry frowns, and looks at the date scrawled on the back of it. "1973."

Theo swallows hard. Rubs his thumb across his mother's swollen stomach.

"They ... had another child," Theo whispers.

"Did you know?" Harry tries to ask it as tactfully as possible. If Theo did know, he's never told Harry.

"I knew they had lost babies before me, miscarriages, but they never said -," Theo's voice catches in his throat. Harry squeezes his knee. Theo coughs slightly. "Sorry, it's just seeing her face -,"

"Don't be, it's fine. I get it." Harry bends down to press a kiss to Theo's hand, trying to feed words through the bond. *I love you*.

"Thank you," Theo says thickly, staring down at the photograph. Harry tries to give him some privacy, looks down at the small notebook and opens it. The scrawl inside reminds him of Theo's elegant writing. Probably Apollonius. Most of it seems to be in a language Harry doesn't know, but then, about halfway through, he sees handwriting he recognises, something he can read. *Tom Riddle's diary from second year*.

"Voldemort wrote in this," Harry mutters. "What the hell is a *horcrux*?"

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

A Mother's Gift

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (PTSD/Depression)

This time, Narcissa has words.
Next time, it's Daphne's turn.

A big reminder, both of our boys are grieving. It's complicated. But trust me, this is a Nott/Pott for a reason. Love finds a way. (But when it's a sixteen-year-old boy with terrible communication skills, love takes a bit longer to get there).

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

Theo is confused.

“Say that word again,” he says, looking between Harry and the small black book he’s holding.

“Huh? Do you mean -?” Harry repeats the word but Theo only hears hisses.

“Harry, that’s not English,” Theo frowns.

“It isn’t?” Harry looks down at the journal in his hands. “It’s right here.”

“Let me see.” Harry twists the notebook but Theo clicks his tongue in frustration. “Harry, this is parselscript.”

“It is?” Harry stares at it. “Really? It ... it looks normal to me.”

Theo stares at the lyrical script on the page that he has come to recognise from his own parseltongue lexicon and then up at Harry. How can he possibly not recognise the language that he gave Theo his courting gift in? Then a horrible thought strikes him. *Fucking Odin, not that.*

“When you wrote in the diary in second year, Riddle’s diary, what language was it in?” Theo demands.

“What?” Harry’s eyebrows knit together. “English, obviously.”

“Did anyone else see it?” Theo presses. “Granger or Weasley?”

“No, why would that -?” Harry takes in a breath and stares down at the page, his fingers tracing over the written words. Theo can see his fingertips are trembling. “You think it was parselscript?”

“Yes,” Theo says, swallowing hard.

“But ...” Harry frowns down at the page, his voice becoming quiet with wonderment. “Why couldn’t I see it? Did I write back in English or parseltongue? How come I couldn’t tell?”

“I ... don’t know,” Theo takes a deep breath, “but perhaps it is to do with ... the author.”

“Tom,” Harry’s green eyes are fixed on the words in front of him.

Theo hates the way Harry says the Dark Lord’s name. Before it seemed like an irreverent joke whenever Harry said it, a way for him to undercut the power of a distant and hated person, but now it’s different. Now it’s too familiar and all Theo can see is the way the Dark Lord’s red eyes fixed on Harry in the Ministry of Magic, staring at Harry with a possessive darkness that haunts Theo’s nightmares. In those dreams, the Dark Lord offers again: *One chance, dear Harry*. In those dreams, Harry agrees.

“I don’t understand,” Harry mutters. Neither does Theo. There are so many things he doesn’t understand right now and it is too fucking much to bear.

“Try speaking it,” Theo says, pushing the book back towards Harry, who takes it hesitantly as if it’s been dipped in something filthy.

“Okay,” Harry takes a deep breath and begins to speak. It’s all hisses. He looks up at Theo. “Parseltongue?”

Theo nods, throat suddenly parched. *How can he not know?*

“Can you translate it?” Theo asks desperately. There has to be some way to understand this, something that doesn’t imply that Harry and the Dark Lord are connected in a way that is threatening and opaque.

“I don’t know! I mean, I just read it and I understand it, but I don’t know what that word is in English and when I say it, it - it only comes out as hisses ...” Harry stares at the letters, biting his lip. Theo watches as his fingers begin to twitch and thinks of his panic attack in the woods. Theo doesn’t want to bring on another one. “I don’t - It doesn’t even look different to me, I thought Tom’s diary was written in English, how could I not see the difference -?”

“It’s okay,” Theo says soothingly, taking the book from Harry’s hand and putting it into the box again, setting the photographs of his mother aside on the bed. He grabs Harry’s right hand, rubbing his thumb over the Prince ring where it is hidden away. It is strange seeing Harry’s hand without his Slytherin ring. He touches the bare space and sees Harry flinch. He misses it, Theo can tell. He tries to think of something comforting and settles lamely on a simple platitude. “We’ll work it out.”

Harry nods, staring at the book, his teeth worrying his bottom lip before looking up into Theo’s face. His eyes are turbulent and so very, very bright. Theo wants nothing more than to protect him, always. He remembers, horribly, Harry’s weakness after the Ministry of magic. He was so broken, so sore, still so impossibly alive. Theo longs suddenly for Fabiola’s cottage, for the safety of that small space, for the knowledge that Harry was safe with him. He decides to try to say something else.

“I ... we have the parseltongue lexicon, we have Sahara, we can ... we can work on translating it,” Theo says, even though he assures himself that he will put the little book away and never touch it again. He doesn’t care what the Dark Lord wrote. He doesn’t want to think about the connection

between Harry and the monster who seems to covet him so fiercely. Harry nods pensively and then groans.

"This is ... ugh," Harry flops his forehead forward onto Theo's shoulder. "I don't need more stuff to work out, Theo."

"I know." Theo strokes Harry's hair. His promise to give Harry time for whatever he is keeping to himself chafes him, it's like an ache inside Theo's chest that won't go away. *Why won't you tell me?*

"I will," Harry kisses him softly, lips tentative. Theo suddenly curses Harry's ability to hear Theo's thoughts. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Fine."

Theo pulls away and flops down on the sun-bleached bed covering, dust flying up around him in a cloud, trying and failing to keep curtness out of his tone. He breathes in that lily of the valley scent and thinks of his mother, lying in this bed, dying. He closes his eyes. Theo tries not to think about everything he feels, how his insides feel as if they are turning to stone with furious agony because Apollonius is dead, his mother is dead, he killed somebody and there are still things he does not know about what's going on with Harry. There are still things he does not know, full stop. *If I don't know what I need to know, how can I keep us safe?*

"Theo? Are you okay?" Harry asks quietly.

"Of course," Theo lies. He does not feel bad about it. If Harry's going to ask a question he should already know the answer to then Harry can have an answer he knows isn't true. There is silence. Theo wonders if Harry's mad, but then Theo feels someone shuffling down the bed and then the sensation of a warm, heavy head resting against his chest. Something inside Theo breaks like a small dam and his rage dissolves, at least for a moment. Theo opens his eyes and looks down at Harry's curls, so happy to feel the weight of his pointed chin against his breastbone. He breathes in the scent of having Harry close to him again. He doesn't smell quite right, not yet. His normal scent is bright and fresh, tea and sugar and sweat and a little of burning. Harry is so full of magic that he always carries a slightly toasted smell, like the way the air smells in the classroom after an intense practical charms class. All of those things are still there, but they are overridden by the smell of healing balms, a strong, tangy eucalyptus smell and the lingering scent of lemon from pain potions. Yet Theo's glad at least to have this at least, to have Harry here, lying against him just like he does at school or he did in Fabiola's cottage. *My Harry, my Mage, mine.*

"*Yours,*" Harry hisses softly, and the parseltongue echoes softly through the bond. Theo sighs heavily with the relief of it. Many things are different but not this. Harry loves him. That's all that matters. Theo tucks a hand around Harry's shoulder and presses a kiss to his curls, brushing his lips against them, the softness of them incredibly comforting.

"Hey," Harry lifts one of the photos of Apollonius and his mother and a young Theo above their heads, staring up at it. "Do you remember this?"

"I think so," Theo squints hard at the picture. He is about four years old. It is taken on the grounds here at Nott Castle. He remembers the swing seat. The creak of it under their weight, the way his legs were too short to reach. The sun in his eyes. His mother's warmth, firm at his side. "Yes."

"You were so cute," Harry chuckles. "Look at those cheeks."

“Yes, well, Apollonius had not started ruining me yet,” Theo says drily. “Then he started making me run around the castle every morning and duelling every weekend. And the hunting.”

“With the panthers, right?” Harry says, and Theo’s suddenly glad he told Harry that story, about Apollonius rearing wild cats to set free on the island and for Theo to hunt or be hunted by, because now it’s not just Theo who remembers.

“Mountain lions,” Theo corrects. “And yes. I hunted game too, deer and birds. Apollonius taught me.”

To hunt. To kill. To fight. To survive, but mainly to survive him.

“What was he like?” Harry asks quietly. “Before he started all that? Before your mother died?”

Theo swallows hard, thinking of the squeak of the swing seat in the photo. How the view over the bay would float away from him when he sat between them there. Theo has not thought about it in years, almost ten years.

“Quiet. Reserved. Much the same most of the time but he ...” Theo hesitates. “We would sit outside together sometimes whilst they had evening drinks. He would ... tell stories.”

“Good ones?” Harry asks, with typical interest. Harry loves a good story.

“Yes,” Theo smirks into Harry’s curls. “Stories about Norse warriors bonded by love and Odin in their souls and covered in runes...”

“Coincidence,” Harry snorts.

“Isn’t it?” Theo’s hand traces the rune mark on Harry’s wrist. “Stories about our Gods and their adventures, stories of the homeland. Mother would tell them too. She would lie with me in bed, like this, and whisper them to me until I slept.”

“What was your favourite?” Harry asks.

“I liked the stories of Loki, the trickster God,” Theo smiles to remember. He is grateful for Harry, grateful suddenly to have this moment, this memory, in this place full of despair. To remember something good. “I love the story of how Loki shape-shifted to bring gifts to the Gods.”

“Merlin was a shapeshifter,” Harry says thoughtfully. “Is it different from an animagus?”

“Yes, Merlin could shapeshifter into many forms, not just one animal. He also completely maintained his mind whilst inside animal form, unlike animagus’ which sometimes struggle to do that,” Theo said, thinking of Sirius Black, who was more of a useless fucking dog than a man. He taps Harry reproachfully on the nose. “But just because you’re a Mage doesn’t mean you should go getting ideas.”

“You don’t want me to be a shapeshifter?” Harry twists his head up to grin cheekily up at him and Theo’s heart almost stops for a moment. *Odin, he is so fucking beautiful.* “You don’t want me to be like Loki?”

“I like you fine as you are,” Theo says firmly. “And I dread to think what you’d get up to if you could become a flea or fly, like Loki did.”

“Easy, I’d give Malfoy fleas,” Harry says quickly and Theo snorts with laughter.

“Your aspirations are not quite as great as Loki’s then,” Theo chortles, his heart full of fondness for the predictability of Harry’s dislike of Draco. *Many things change, but not that.*

“You were going to call Sahara Loki,” Harry comments.

“I was,” Theo smiles. “I like the name she has now.”

“Me too,” Harry says drowsily, rubbing his cheek against Theo’s chest, the way he always does when he’s sleepy. It is, quite frankly, fucking adorable and Theo has missed it like he would miss his wand hand if it were severed. “I only chose it because it’s where she’s from.”

“I know.” Theo smiles fondly into his hair. It’s familiar, this feeling of being able to calm Harry, the one who can get him to sleep and help him sleep well. Familiar and lovely. It eases something inside his chest, something that has been tight and agonising for a week. Harry sighs.

“I have to go to Rome on Wednesday.”

“For the OWLS,” Theo confirms, his fingers absentmindedly playing with Harry’s t-shirt hem by his hip, stroking soft circles on the skin beneath it. Harry has lost most of the weight he managed to put on in the last term in the course of the last three weeks. Theo worries if he is eating properly, or skipping meals again when he gets anxious. Although he can’t imagine that the combined force of Severus Snape and Kreacher would stand for that. “You are nervous?”

“Not about the exams,” Harry sighs. “About ... leaving Skye.”

Theo knows why. He remembers the Shrieking Shack. The word ‘fealty’ scrawled on every surface and Harry’s glasses, crushed on the floor. *Never again. I will not let anyone take him from me again.*

“You will be safe,” he whispers. “Snape and Lupin will never let you fall into the Dark Lord’s hands again -,”

“I know.” Harry sighs and Theo can tell from the aggravated tic in his left finger with the Black ring on that it is still too stressful for Harry to talk about. Theo imagines his nightmares are even worse than usual. Harry pulls up another picture. The one of Theo’s mother in late pregnancy, with a younger Apollonius who looks, to Theo’s eyes, the happiest he has ever seen him. It is a version of the man who must have perished long before Theo was even born. “Nineteen seventy-three? That’s ... six years before you were born.”

“And only one year after they were married,” Theo says. “I think ... it must have been their first baby.”

“I can’t imagine you being someone’s little brother.” Harry muses. Theo’s heart clenches.

“Me either,” Theo mutters. *I have always been alone.*

“Me too,” Harry says softly. This time, Theo does not curse that Harry can hear his thoughts, does not curse when Harry takes Theo’s fingers from his rune marks and kisses his fingertips. Theo shivers. “Not anymore.”

It is the greatest gift Harry has given him, Theo thinks, this feeling of no longer being solitary, of being tied to another person in the universe, unable to be set adrift or left to float away with no one to notice him. The weight of the soul bond is suddenly lovely, the most luxurious feeling in the world, and for the first time all day, Theo feels his shoulders relax.

“Yeah,” Theo’s throat suddenly feels thick. “Come here.”

Harry twists his face up towards him and Theo kisses him, as gently as he possibly can, but it’s difficult because his hand has slipped across Harry’s back where his t-shirt has ridden up and Theo has an overwhelming desire to stroke every single one of his vertebrae. Theo wants to be hurricaned, he wants the flashing of thoughts and memory and feeling that kissing Harry usually brings. He wants to forget that he is even here, that any of this happened, he wants to lose himself in touch and taste and feeling. He can’t stop the thought from surging up, not caring that Harry will probably hear it: *I want you in every fucking way imaginable*. Harry inhales sharply and slides a hand up to grip Theo’s hair, lying completely on top of him and Theo is aware, suddenly, of the rumbling sensation of magic around Harry that always surges up when he’s turned on and it’s exactly what Theo wants. He kisses Harry harder, hands sliding up under his t-shirt, his thoughts unravelling inside his mind: *Hurricane me, please, please don’t shut me out* -

“Harrison!”

The door opens sharply and Snape is standing there. Harry quickly pulls away, wiping his hand against his mouth and glaring at his Sire.

“Couldn’t you knock?”

“What did I say about closed doors?” Snape says cryptically but Harry seems to understand. Snape’s eyes flick over Theo who is leaning up on his elbows, glaring at his Head of House. *Fuck you, you’re a worse interruption than Sirius Black on Valentine’s Day*.

“Well, that’s going to make our dorm next year really fucking awkward,” Harry snarks.

“Language,” Snape growls, gesturing to Harry. “We have been called away. Come.”

“Where are we going?” Harry asks, sliding off the bed with obedience that Theo finds very annoying.

“Gringotts,” Snape grunts, waving his hand towards Harry, who is pulling his t-shirt back into place and shivering a little. Even despite the way his skin feels warm to the touch all the time now, Theo knows he feels the cold more since Bellatrix’s imprisonment. Theo is irritated when Harry lets Snape touch his shoulder with his wand, lets him mutter a warming charm, and barely even notices it. Theo doesn’t understand when Harry became so comfortable around his Sire or why Theo finds it so completely irksome.

“Why?” Theo demands quietly. He notices the flicker of Snape’s eyebrow.

“Harrison has been summoned by the Goblin King to be present at the reading of the will of Sirius Black,” Snape rests a hand on Harry’s slim shoulder, careful eyes examining Harry’s face as if he is worried something awful might have happened in the time they have been apart. Theo feels a flash of exasperation. *What does he think I’ll have done to Harry?* “We need to be swift. This is a private reading but they want to avoid any knowledge leaking out to other parties.”

“Other parties?” Harry frowns.

“The Headmaster,” Theo says since it is so utterly obvious.

“Okay, let’s go.” Harry turns and looks at Theo. He doesn’t reach out to touch him, even though that’s all that Theo wants. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

When? Theo wants to ask. *Don’t go*, he wants to say. Instead, he just nods. Clenches his hands around his box to stop from reaching out, from grabbing Harry and holding him in place until the panic that is swirling in Theo’s gut subsides. Harry promised not to leave Theo behind again. Theo knows this is not it, he knows that, but it doesn’t stop the feeling. Theo feels left behind. Harry seems to see something in Theo’s face because he breaks away from his Sire, quickly crossing the room. He puts his hand on the back of Theo’s neck and brings their foreheads together. For a quick second, there is a flash of gold and blue around them.

“*Mine*,” Harry hisses in parseltongue and Theo feels a trembling thrill of contentment, of excitement, of rightness. *Yours*, Theo thinks fiercely, taking a deep breath. *Always yours*.

“I’m yours too,” Harry murmurs. He kisses Theo’s cheek lightly and then, he’s gone. Walking out of the door with Snape’s hand on his shoulder blades, guiding him down the stairs. Harry doesn’t look back and Theo feels it again. *He’s not leaving me, he’s just leaving*. It doesn’t change the fact he feels left. In their wake stands Lady Malfoy, hands folded gently in front of her, looking at Theo steadily.

“Are you ready to depart?” she asks quietly.

“Yes,” Theo says coldly, closing the latch on his mother’s box carefully. Lady Malfoy’s eyes fix upon it.

“A possession of your mother’s?” She says. Theo nods curtly. Lady Malfoy nods and looks around his mother’s bedroom. For some reason, Theo doesn’t want her to look, and dislikes the feeling of her cold eyes perusing the space in which his mother died.

“Medea always did enjoy wood-crafted objects,” Lady Malfoy muses. Theo’s eyebrows shoot up.

“You knew my mother?” he asks curtly. Lady Malfoy inclines her head gently. “I did not know that.”

“I imagine there are many things you do not know about me, Mr Nott,” Lady Malfoy says. Theo scowls.

“I cannot imagine why I would have any need to learn them,” Theo mutters.

“Hmm.” Lady Malfoy assesses him slowly. “I am reminded of a game that I have played with Harry.”

Theo winces. He hates that this woman, Draco Malfoy’s mother, the wife of the man who kidnapped Harry from Hogwarts and from Theo, has the right to call Theo’s soul-bonded Mage by his first name. He hates that she has had conversations with Harry Theo was not party to. That she, as a daughter of the House of Black, now has Harry’s protection as Lord Black.

“What game is that?” Theo asks, resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

“The questions game,” Lady Malfoy answers.

“That Harry and Professor Snape play,” Theo mutters. *The game that helped Harry trust him.* Lady Malfoy inclines her head.

“Might I come inside?” she asks politely. Theo stares at her then shrugs shortly. “Thank you.”

She quietly enters the room, walks slowly to the window seat and sits down. Theo has to admire her poise. Her back is straight, her silvery hair half pulled away from her face with a black ribbon, her pale hands folded on her lap. It’s bizarre, Theo realises, to see another woman sitting in the place that his mother once occupied. There is something sharp and needlelike working its way into the muscles of his heart. He tries to swallow it away. It doesn’t help.

“What would be the benefit of the two of us engaging in the question game?” Theo asks, sitting back down on his mother’s bed opposite her, holding his mother’s box on his lap.

“The beginnings of mutual trust would be the immediate benefit,” Lady Malfoy said softly.

“I do not see why it should be essential that I trust you,” Theo says. He already hates that Harry seems to. Lady Malfoy looks at him for a long moment and then looks down at the ring on her middle finger, the small black diamond in a silver setting.

“You dislike that Harry is my Lord,” she says softly. It is so surprising that she would say the words, that she would phrase them so bluntly, a combination of familiarity and deference, that Theo cannot help his reaction. He flinches visibly. Lady Malfoy does not move, simply looks at him, waiting for a response. Theo almost despises her then, for her perfect poise in the face of his lack of it.

“Yes,” Theo says firmly, gripping the box tightly in his hands. “I do.”

“Because you believe he is too young for Lordship? Because you believe I am not trustworthy, despite my fealty?” Lady Malfoy raises her eyebrows slowly. “Or because you dislike the concept of other people having a claim upon him?”

All three, Theo thinks silently and stares down at his mother’s box. He says nothing.

“If you prefer, you may ask me three questions and I will only ask one,” Lady Malfoy says, tucking a stray piece of silver hair behind her ear. Theo sees the glint of large sapphire earrings. “You are also not obliged to answer it. I, however, will answer anything you ask me truthfully.”

“How would I ascertain the truth of your statements?” Theo mutters.

“You would have to trust the value of my word,” Lady Malfoy says calmly. Theo glares at her. He is used, in every situation, to being the most composed person in the room. Granted, those rooms are usually full of teenagers, but he finds Lady Malfoy’s self-possession profoundly irksome. Her sangfroid is like the flawless surface of a glassy mirror. Theo feels a mixture of envy, admiration and the overwhelming desire to shatter that mirror, if possible. He has not felt such a way since he was a young child, faced with Apollonius’ stoic grief and lack of compassion in the wake of his mother’s death. *Why don’t you care?* How he would have loved on that day to scream and rage at his father, to rip out his own heart and show it to his father, so the man would know how broken it was.

“I will ask,” Theo says, shifting tensely on the bed. Lady Malfoy nods serenely.

“Please,” she nods gently. “Begin.”

Theo runs his fingers over the wooden bees engravings around the M on the box.

“Does your husband know?” Theo asks. “About me?”

“He knows of your existence and that your father is dead and you are under the guardianship of someone outside of your family,” Lady Malfoy says easily. “He is not aware who that person is.”

Theo nods and picks at a splinter by the hinge.

“He does not know that you are moving in unexpected circles,” she continues. “He does not think of you, he does not consider you and that is the way it shall continue under my watch. The Dark Lord, as I am sure you know, recruits young. It is my intention to shield you from his arm and eyes.”

“Why would you care?” Theo asks without thinking, promptly forgetting that this would technically count as a second question. In his mind's eye, he sees Harry on the floor of the Ministry of Magic, the Dark Lord standing over him with eyes as red as rubies, full of possessive greed. Theo feels himself shiver and bites his lip, trying to hold it inside. Lady Malfoy does not seem worried or to have noticed. She tilts her head thoughtfully, considering his question.

“I do not, in essentials, care for you,” she says slowly, precisely. “I care for Harry because he is Lord Black and I have sworn my fealty to him. Thus, by extension, I have some concern over the nature of your bond -,”

“Which is not your business,” Theo snarls, feeling rage light inside him like dry wood. *Why is everyone always so fucking concerned over what is ours and ours alone?*

“I am aware,” Lady Malfoy inclines her head as if Theo has just said something mildly interesting and not growled at her like a feral beast. “but I also have a measure of care for you as a child alone in the world.”

“I do not need pity,” Theo mumbles.

“Yet protection may be helpful,” Lady Malfoy says. “Besides, I feel a certain care for you as the only surviving child of Medea Nott.”

Theo's head shoots up at that.

“The only surviving child,” he repeats slowly. He doesn't want to waste his last question. Instead, he reaches into the box and pulls out the photograph from nineteen-seventy-three. He passes it to Lady Malfoy who looks at it curiously and then smiles tightly.

“They were married the same year I graduated Hogwarts,” Lady Malfoy says. “Shall I tell you of it?”

Theo nods tightly. As long as he does not have to lose a question he does not mind.

“They married in the winter at Nott Mansion, it was a quiet affair. There was quite an age difference between them, Medea was over ten years my senior, your father was nearly fifty -,”

“I know,” Theo mutters. He has never liked it when people talk about the difference in his parents’ ages. Apollonius was a predator in many ways, but Theo knows he was not a predator towards women or his mother, no matter what the rumours said. Theo knows Apollonius loved his mother. *As much as he could love anyone.*

“- I did not know her well but I recall that I admired her robes and dress,” Lady Malfoy continues as if Theo has not spoken, “and her happiness. She was pregnant within a few months and very content. I knew her from afar only, through our husbands’ work.”

As a Death Eater, Theo thinks. *In the Dark Lord’s circle.*

“The baby ...” Theo doesn’t ask, he just says the words. All of his questions lie inside them. Lady Malfoy nods.

“Stillborn,” she says factually. “A daughter.”

Theo stares at her. He is desperate to ask more but he will not give it, no, he will save his final question. It seems that Lady Malfoy knows because she smiles, gently and continues to speak and Theo tries not to resent her compassion.

“I do not know her name,” she says softly, eyes regretful. “As you know, in the Noble and Most Ancient Houses, names of children are kept from friends and family until the naming day ceremony and I did not know her well then. Only later. After.”

“After,” Theo repeats. *After my sibling was dead.* Lady Malfoy nods.

“I lost many children,” she says. Theo looks into her eyes sharply. It is an astonishing thing to admit to a child you barely know who evidently distrusts you, Theo can see that. He can also see that if this is how Lady Malfoy went about gaining Harry’s trust then Theo is unsurprised it worked. Harry respects the sharing of secrets and this is definitely a secret.

“I did not know that,” Theo whispers. “Draco never ...”

“Draco does not know,” Lady Malfoy says. “You will have heard, I am sure, the rumours that circled the Noble and Most Ancient Houses when I married Lord Malfoy.”

“Yes,” Theo says shortly. Theo knows, like all pureblood children, the infamous rumours that circulated when Lord Malfoy married the silver-haired daughter to the House of Black: that Narcissa Black was secretly a lovechild of Abraxas Malfoy and the marriage was simply a way to pull her back into the fold of the Malfoy’s.

“You can imagine, then, the kind of distasteful comments that would have circulated if it was revealed we lost children before time,” Lady Malfoy says. Theo can. Suggestions from the Light Wizengamot seats who would say it was an indication that the Noble and Most Ancient House wells are poisoned with inbreeding. It would have been cruel and relentless.

“My mother,” Theo says, throat dry. It is not a question, just a prompt.

“Your mother knew the pain of this loss. It is ... quite particular,” Lady Malfoy’s voice is as delicate as frost. “In the times when I got with child again, I would visit. We would sit. She would sew, I might write or study. Her companionship was valuable to me. Hence, you have some inherent value to me also.”

Theo looks at her, holding the gaze in those blue eyes. He cannot fault their sincerity.

“Why are you telling me this?” Theo whispers. He knows it is his last question and maybe it’s a waste, but he cannot stop the words from falling from his lips.

“To help you understand that you are not threatened by me,” Lady Malfoy says simply. “I do not seek to threaten you or your bond with Harry. I seek to protect you.”

“Why?”

“Would you believe me if I said it is because children deserve protecting?” Lady Malfoy smiles softly.

“No,” Theo shakes his head because no one believes that. Not really.

“I thought so,” Lady Malfoy says quietly. “Then perhaps you will believe it is because there are some children I cannot protect.”

She hands his photo back to him. Theo takes it, staring. *Draco*, Theo thinks. *She cannot protect her own son so she seeks to protect me*. Theo wants to be derogatory, he wants to dismiss her with a curt word but finds that he cannot do this. He looks at the photo of his mother, of the sister he never knew. He looks up at Lady Malfoy and knows. She has been unable to protect so many children she loved.

“Ask your question,” Theo says.

“You are bonded with Harry,” Lady Malfoy says. Theo tries to answer but she holds up a hand. “I have asked no question.” Theo closes his mouth with a frown. “I do not ask you to confirm it nor do I question it, I merely state it. You have a bond, possibly a heart bond, and I notice that you feel a strain.”

“No,” Theo denies, feeling a flush. *How could she possibly notice that?*

“I have asked no question,” she repeats lightly. “You may think of me as you wish, but I know Harry.”

“Not as I do,” Theo snaps.

“I did not say so,” she inclines her head respectfully, in utter contrast to Theo’s own rudeness. He would be ashamed if he wasn’t as taut as a bowstring with the direction the conversation is going. “I only say that I know him. His fidelity to you is limitless.”

Theo tries to show no reaction to that word. *Fidelity*. He remembers suddenly, the utter joy of accepting their bond in Privet Drive. Harry’s confused nonchalance and Theo’s disbelieving relief: *It’s a big fucking deal*. He stares at the photo of his mother. *What would she have said if she knew I was fidelity bonded to Harry?* Theo has no idea.

“What is your question?” He whispers.

“You are frustrated with his distance,” Lady Malfoy says quietly.

“That’s not a question,” Theo says automatically but Lady Malfoy smiles ruefully. “And you don’t know that.”

“I am more than familiar with the frustrations of teenage men,” she says softly.

“Ask your question,” Theo snaps. Lady Malfoy nods and leans forward.

“My husband told me about the veil of Charon,” she says softly. “Of Harrison’s return.”

Theo stares at her. In his mind's eye, he sees it again. Harry stumbles through the veil. Theo feels the wrench inside of him, the bond still there, aching brutally. He hears Apollonius’ words: *Our bonds do not disappear in death, Theodore! They become our mourning, our grief, our burden.*

“That is not a question,” Theo swallows hard.

“It is not, but this is,” Lady Malfoy says. “Given all that has changed between the two of you -,”

“Nothing has changed,” Theo blurts out. He is Harry’s and Harry is his. Nothing else matters. *I will not let it be different. I will not lose what we have. Not ever.*

“- given all that you have both suffered, do you not consider it a possibility that Harry’s new distance from you -,”

“He is not distant!” Theo practically yells but she is completely unmoved.

“- is simply an attempt to protect you?” She finishes.

Theo stares. He thinks of Harry taking the pain from the Canopic jar from him. *Is that what all of this is?* He pushes the thought away.

“I protect Harry,” Theo snarls. “I protect *him*. ”

As much as he lets me, Theo thinks bitterly.

“You protect one another,” Lady Malfoy corrects, unfazed. “*If you betray me and Theo I won’t forgive it, ever.*”

“Excuse me?”

“That is what Harry threatened me with, after our first meeting,” she says quietly. “I imagine that in a time when he is confronted with his own inability to protect those he loves, his godfather and Arthur Weasley, the man who has been a father to him for five years, a child such as Harry Potter will protect even more fiercely than ever before.”

Theo swallows and hears the words of their bond in his mind. *I protect what protects me*. Then Harry’s words earlier, his annoyed derision: *Right, so I protect what protects me except I’m not allowed to protect you?*

“He doesn’t need to protect me,” Theo says. After all, Theo is not the one being beaten to death by muggles, dying on the floor of Grimmauld Place, throwing himself through the veil and being tortured by Death Eaters and the Dark Lord.

“Does he not?” Lady Malfoy leans forward, a kind expression on her face. “Do you know the deep extent to which he is connected to the Dark Lord?”

Theo thinks of Harry staring down at the Dark Lord's handwriting. *Tom*. His shaking fingers. He thinks of the Dark Lord's words to Harry: *Come along now, little weapon*. The affection and the familiarity. *Come with me and be remade*. What would the world be like if Harry went with him? A Mage and a Dark Lord. Theo can imagine the terror. *Yet I would still love him. I would still stand by his side*.

"It doesn't matter," Theo's voice is harsh. "Not to me."

"It shall matter to him. He is a being of incredible power but burdened most by guilt," she says, her voice suddenly as sharp as diamond. The hair on the back of Theo's neck rises up as if her voice is full of a cold breeze he can feel on his skin. There is an air of premonition to it. "It shall matter and he will veil himself from you."

Theo stares at her, unable to stop discomfort trickling down his spine. Her use of the word 'veil' makes him dig his nails into his palms. Why does he have the oddest sensation that Lady Malfoy is speaking a truth that hasn't come to pass yet? Why does he feel the tension in the air, the same feeling of Norse rune stones being cast to catch the future?

"No," Theo whispers, even though it seems redundant.

"Has he ever given indication that he might keep things of importance from you under the guise of protecting you?" Lady Malfoy asks gently.

Blaise. Theo remembers the look in Harry's eyes when Theo found out about the consort-shield vow, remembers his words which cut through Theo like a searing potion, the truth that Harry had kept a secret with Blaise. Kept it because of Theo. *I asked him to protect you and only you. This was the best solution*.

"You have asked your question," Theo says, standing up abruptly. Lady Malfoy nods regally and rises.

"Indeed, I shall take you back to the Greengrass house," she nods, looking around the room and then fixing her eyes on him again. "She would be pleased with you, Theodore."

For the first time in their acquaintance, Theo doesn't flinch hearing his name on her lips. He stares down at his mother's box and slips the photograph back inside. He hopes that Lady Malfoy is right but he has no way of knowing. The only one who could have told him for certain is Apollonius and Apollonius is dead.

"I am ready to leave," he says quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

The House of Greengrass

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (PTSD/Depression)

This time, Theo finds his way out of his thoughts.

Next time, Severus has had quite enough of Sirius Black, dead or alive.

This chapter is for the friends who sit with us in our darkest places and help us navigate our way back towards the light. Kudos to those friends.

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

Lady Malfoy takes Theo back to Greengrass House, a beautiful Georgian townhouse on Grosvenor Square. It is quiet and elegant and luxurious and Theo would like it a lot if he didn't find himself constantly thinking that somewhere nearby in the city, there is the rubble of Grimmauld Place, the location in which Harry died at Yule, the place he was taken away to.

"I shall communicate regularly," Lady Malfoy says, but offers no more elucidation on content or frequency and promptly disappears into the parlour to seek out Lady Greengrass. Theo walks up three flights of gilded stairs and past gold-framed paintings of Greengrass ancestors until he reaches the guest bedroom he has been occupying since he left Hogwarts. He pushes open the door and finds Daphne stretched out on his bed, reading a book, with none other than George Weasley.

"You're back," she says, turning the page.

"You're on my bed," Theo looks at Weasley. "With Weasley."

"Hey Nott," Weasley says, looking up from a notebook he is scribbling in. He shoves it in front of Daphne's face. "Does that look right to you?"

"Use phi mu epsilon here, it's a stronger magical number," Daphne comments with a frown as George nods and scribbles something else with a grin. They are clearly working on arithmancy equations, for Odin knows what reason.

"You are the smartest bloody girl on the planet, Greengrass," George chuckles.

Daphne rolls her eyes drolly but Theo can tell she is pleased and it is bloody insufferable.

"Are you two fucking?" Theo says bluntly. He has absolutely no time for Weasley's antics and he has even less time for them on his bed.

"Right now? I don't think so," Weasley grins, utterly unflappable whilst Daphne glares at Theo.

"How is that your business?" Daphne demands.

“Because you are on my *bed*.”

“Don’t worry, Nott, the lady Greengrass has set her boundaries and I keep well within them,” Weasley says, affecting a more upper-class tone that he no doubt thinks is a good impression of Theo, before sighing dramatically, closing his book and climbing off Theo’s bed. “Until anon, good lady?”

“Until anon,” Daphne murmurs in response, her eyes fixed on Theo. Weasley stops in front of him, giving him a slow look up and down. Whilst Fred Weasley's gaze is always challenging, George Weasley is prone to a long, assessing gaze that Theo finds much more uncomfortable.

“You saw Harry?” Weasley asks. Theo nods curtly. “Do you know where he’s going next?”

Theo nods and looks Weasley over, noticing the black jumper with the silver stitching. *He's wearing the house of Black colours*. Weasley is clearly on his way to Sirius Black’s will reading.

“Go well,” Theo mutters grudgingly, then, because he knows Weasley is at least bonded to care for Harry in some way, says words he never imagined saying. He finds himself trying to explain Harry’s mental state to someone: “He’s ... he’s not ...”

Well. Happy. Healed. As open as he was before he was kidnapped. Something flashes in George Weasley's eyes. Theo sincerely hopes it is not pity.

“Got it,” Weasley claps his hand on Theo’s shoulder and Theo believes he does. Theo believes that the Weasley twins are some of the people in the world who understand Harry the easiest. Perhaps it’s something in the Black magic, or perhaps it's just they saw him exactly as he was, as soon as they met him. Harry's recounted to Theo before how Fred and George treated him perfectly normal from the first time they met him on the train. Weasley grins back to Greengrass. “Bye, beautiful!”

“Facts aren’t compliments, Weasley,” Daphne mutters but he only laughs and lets himself out. Theo stares at Daphne, eyebrows raised expectantly. She sighs impatiently and rolls her eyes. “He’s a friend.”

“A friend.”

“Yes, we are allowed additional friends, I believe.”

Theo, who only has two friends and understands a barb when it is thrown, grunts in irritation. He opens his trunk that he keeps locked beside the bed and slips his mother’s box inside. He can feel Daphne’s eyes watching his every move as he re-locks the trunk.

“You believe that any of my family or our house elves will steal from you?” Daphne asks lightly.

Theo says nothing. He pulls his cloak off and drapes it over the chair, unbuttoning his cuffs and turning to face Daphne. She raises her eyebrows slowly.

“How was Harry?” She asks.

“Fine.”

“How was Lady Malfoy?”

“Fine.”

“How was your father’s pyre?”

“Also fine,” Theo folds his arms and scowls at her. “Do you need something, Daphne?”

“I require answers that are more than one word long,” Daphne snorts, setting down her book and patting the bed beside her. Theo looks at her in irritation.

“Why are you dressed like that?” he asks.

“Like what?” She asks dangerously.

“Muggle,” Theo says flatly. She’s wearing a pale blue silk skirt and blazer, with a white shirt that reminds Theo painfully of the shirt Harry wore on Valentine's day.

“It may be muggle but it is Valentino,” Daphne sniffs, tugging the cuffs neatly. “I look impeccable.”

“Be that as it may, why?”

“Weasley and I went for coffee in muggle London.”

It sounds like a date but Theo won’t press the matter.

“And that was pleasing to you?” He says sceptically. Being Blaise’s friend for six years has meant that both he and Daphne have an indoctrinated low tolerance for bad coffee. During the holidays, they have frequently met in Italy or in the Giardino for a morning cup. Unless Daphne found exceptional coffee in muggle London, she is unlikely to be satisfied.

“Of course it was not, there were frappuchinos, but I had the notion, Theodore, that you might also enjoy a trip out today,” Daphne sighs, resting the book on her legs. “But I am hardly inclined to take you since you are struggling to form complete, polite sentences.”

“I don’t want to go anyway,” Theo mutters, turning to the dressing table and removing his cravat pin and cravat, unbuttoning his collar. What he wants to do is lie on his bed and stare at the ceiling and think about the fact that Harry can read the Dark Lord’s handwriting in parseltongue but can’t see that it’s parseltongue. He wants to ponder Lady Malfoy’s words. *Do you know the deep extent to which he is connected to the Dark Lord?* Theo does not know, not entirely, but he is very concerned that she may. “What the fuck is a frappuchino?”

“Sweet and frothy,” Daphne wrinkles her nose.

“Like you then,” Theo says. Daphne narrows her eyes.

“Given your tone lacks any improvement, I take it you do not care that there is an exhibition of medieval texts at the British museum right now?” Daphne purses her lips, sliding two tickets out of her book to wave at him.

“Muggle texts,” Theo mutters, even though he knows that they are likely some of the finest examples of ancient literature on display to the public.

“They have some Viking texts included,” Daphne says, raising an eyebrow. “11th Century.”

Theo shoots her a look of profound irritation but he will not be caught for just anything.

“Do you happen to know which?” He asks slowly.

“King Cnut and his wife -,”

“Emma,” Theo finishes for her, nodding slowly. “Yes.”

Daphne is his only friend who shares his interest in all things ancient. She knows that she has offered a tantalising treat and he sees the amusement of it flash inside her eyes.

“Yes, quite fascinating,” Daphne picks up her book again. “If you would like to behold it, then please, join me on the bed and answer my questions in complete sentences and we shall soon be on our way. Otherwise, I shall take Tori.”

They hold one another’s gaze. Part of Theo wants to ask her to leave, to continue his afternoon of thinking and silently raging at a universe that has left him and Harry with only Severus fucking Snape as a living parent between them, but oddly, he cannot. He is too tired, he misses Harry too much and when Daphne leaves Theo has a mild fear that the loneliness of his grief may engulf him entirely. He does not grieve Apollonius, of course he does not, but the photographs inside the box have cracked open a chasm inside of him, the memories he shared with Harry filling it with joy edged with sorrow. He grieves the annihilation of his family. He grieves the end of the Notts. He grieves those summer evenings on the swing set and the stories at bedtime and despite his annoyance at Daphne, he is not quite ready to face it all. Theo slowly sits down on the bed beside her and leans his head into the pillow with a sigh. Daphne says nothing but it is as if she has seen and heard every lonely thought inside his head. She holds the tickets against the page and moves them down with every line she reads.

“What are you reading?” Theo asks, after a few minutes of watching her dark, perfectly manicured eyebrows furrow and her delicate finger nails, painted rose pink, moving down the page. It is clearly a play of some kind.

“*The Tempest*,” she says. “I have finally reached the end of the Shakespeare plays, despite you ruining them for me.”

“I only ruined Hamlet,” Theo grumbles.

“I can see why Harry enjoys them so much, and the Gryffindors,” Daphne muses. “They do adhere to a strong heroic narrative in most cases.”

“Harry is not a hero,” Theo mutters, rubbing his forehead. He thinks the smoke from Apollonius’ pyre has given him a headache. “People just insist upon making him one.”

“I am not sure how else heroes come to be,” Daphne comments. “Shall I ask my questions again?”

“If it pleases you,” Theo sighs. Despite the weariness that is settling into his bones like cement, Theo would quite like to attend the exhibition. *A fitting homage to Apollonius Nott, to spend an afternoon staring at ancient Viking stories of death.*

“Oh yes, Theodore, of course I have nothing I would like to do more with my time than persuade you to engage in conversation like a human being,” Daphne rolls her eyes but shifts slightly, so her shoulder is pressed against his. “How was Apollonius’ pyre?”

“It was satisfactory,” Theo says honestly. “A very simple procedure.”

“Did you use a bow?”

Theo shakes his head. The process of firing a burning arrow onto the pyre is traditional but also unreliable. It is a procedure best undertaken with a host of archers and witnessed by an entire family or clan. He is the last of the Notts. There was no one to witness but him.

“And Lady Malfoy?” Daphne asks. “Do frosty relations improve?”

“I do not know why they should need to,” Theo snorts.

“Perhaps because you yelled at her in the Giardino and that is no way to speak to one’s guardian, especially when one’s guardian is the wife of the Minister of Magic,” Daphne says drily.

“Blaise told you,” Theo rolls his eyes. Of course, he did. He and Daphne have only been at Grosvenor Square for a week but the peregrine falcon flies backwards and forwards between them and the Giardino daily. Theo had never realised until now how frequently his two closest friends communicated during the summer. He himself has always had rapid responses from both of them, but in the past, he often has taken days or even a week to respond and he would never consider writing more than once in a day. Yet Daphne and Blaise send letters constantly, books and newspaper clippings and puzzles and even one-line notes of something that has occurred to them. Since Blaise has been frequenting the Weasley twins new joke shop in Diagon Alley (Theo imagines more for the company of Fred Weasley than for the merchandise) odd little joke items have also been sent through. The latest addition, a tiny pink pygmy puff, is cooing away in the bedroom of Daphne’s little sister, Astoria. Anything Daphne finds interesting, she reports to Blaise. Anything Blaise finds funny, he sends to Daphne. Living for only a few weeks in the House of Greengrass has allowed Theo to see the truth of their relationship, a tangle of friendship and other partners and lustful encounters that Theo has always considered supremely casual, perhaps because of the nature of his and Blaise's arrangement before Harry. Now, watching the way the correspondence mounts on Daphne's desk, he sees the flaws in his assumptions. They are twin suns at the centre of a solar system, pulling other planets into orbit or passing asteroids. They may have romantic encounters with each other and with others, but the underpinning of their arrangement is a connection that is unwavering. He doubts they will ever exchange courting gifts, he doubts they will ever proceed with a bonded arrangement like what he and Harry have, but even if what Daphne and Blaise have together is not what Theo would want, he now knows the truth. They are both his closest friends, but to one another, they are more.

“Naturally,” Daphne tucks a strand of black hair behind her ear. “So? Did you shriek at her again?”

“I did not shriek,” Theo says flatly. “On that occasion or today.”

“Hmm,” Daphne narrows her eyes at him. “She takes an incredible risk in caring for you.”

“She does not care for me,” Theo squeezes his eyes tightly but hears Lady Malfoy’s voice inside his head. *I feel a certain care for you as the only surviving child of Medea Nott.* “At least, not for myself.”

“Whatever reasoning she has, any woman in her position would be wiser to either take you into Malfoy Manor and hand you to the Dark Lord -,”

“Delightful thought,” Theo rubs his eyebrows.

“- or renege on her claim as your guardian and hand you over to my father in truth, not just in name,” Daphne finishes. “Yet she does not. She takes great risk.”

“She is of the House of Black,” Theo shrugs. “They are ... united.”

It is the only word he can think of for the strange loyalty and magic that binds the rag-tag group of daughters and guardsmen of the House of Black to Harry.

“Does not her loyalty to Harry mean you can trust her?” Daphne asks.

“She is loyal to Harry, not to me,” Theo takes a deep breath. His shirt smells like burning. He should change but he is too weary to move.

“But Harry is loyal to you,” Daphne rolls her eyes. “Honestly, Theodore, it is not complicated.”

“I did not say it was complicated,” Theo snaps. “You asked if I could trust her and I answered.”

Daphne clicks her teeth and closes her book, rapping him on the knee with it.

“Thank you,” Theo drawls, reaching a hand down to rub the sore spot.

"I am not doing this," Daphne says calmly, tucking a piece of silky hair behind her ear. "I will not coddle you as Granger coddles Harry. Either speak truthfully or not at all."

"Then I shall not," Theo says gruffly.

"As you wish," Daphne says. There is a knock on the door and Astoria sticks her head around the door, long dark hair in braids over her shoulders. "Tori?"

"Are we going?" Tori asks nervously. She doesn't look at Theo and her anxiety around him only frustrates him.

"Theodore is in the process of deciding," Daphne says, not taking her eyes off her book.

"Okay," Tori's eyes fly to Theo's face and he keeps it impassive. They flutter away. "I need to go to Diagon Alley too, I need ingredients for my Potions homework."

"I thought you finished your homework?" Daphne asks sharply and Tori flushes deeply red for a moment.

"There's some girls meeting at Fortescue's," Astoria mumbles. "Romilda's going, and Theresa. I wondered if I could go now and then meet you at the museum after."

"Vane?" Theo drawls, "and Goldstein's sister? A Gryffindor and a Ravenclaw are unusual companions for a daughter of the House of Greengrass."

“You say that in front of a daughter who just had a Gryffindor in her bedroom,” Daphne’s voice is sharp.

“It’s not your bedroom, you had Weasley in *my* bedroom.”

“I did not have him at all, thank you very much.”

“Then I suppose as long as Astoria doesn’t *have* Vane -,”

Astoria blushes even darker and stares at the floor but Daphne scowls and hits Theo with the book again.

“Ignore Theodore, he’s being a classic example of male narcissism,” Daphne says to her younger sister. “Of course you can go. Have fun at Fortescue’s.”

Astoria ducks gratefully back out. As soon as the door closes, Daphne snaps her book shut, glaring at Theo.

"Don't do that again," she says quietly. "She can socialise with whoever she wants."

"I was only surprised," Theo rubs his sore knee.

"Nothing surprises you. She is afraid of you and you like watching her squirm," Daphne snaps. "Your despair should not make you cruel, Theodore. You will apologise when she returns."

"I am not despairing for I am a Nott, and she is a Greengrass so she does not squirm," Theo mutters, even though he feels horribly disquieted by Daphne’s simple commands and Astoria’s crestfallen expression. If grief makes Harry cold then it makes Theo sharp. "None of you do."

"Tori isn't like me or father or mother," Daphne's voice is like cut glass. "I plan to keep it that way."

Theo eyes his friend closely. For the first time, he notices a raw ferocity in her face that defies her usual studied serenity.

"You do not wish for Astoria to bring glory to the House of Greengrass?" Theo asks. "*Mengintai singa*, that's the motto of the Greengrasses, isn't it? Stalk the lion?"

"Not for my sister," Daphne's eyes glitter as she opens her book again. "I will stalk for both of us."

Today, on a day when childhood feels very distant, this seems like nothing more than ridiculous naiveté.

"Daphne," Theo says quietly. "You cannot keep a daughter of the Sacred Twenty Eight from assuming her place in society."

"You are the last son of the House of Nott, the family who sheltered the teenage Dark Lord and now you are the budding Consort to the Boy-Who-Lived," Daphne scorns. "You are the last person to tell me that I cannot change the course of a supposed future. I will transform the Wizengamot and Astoria will be free from the pressure of the Sacred Twenty Eight. Do not tell me I cannot do it."

"I wouldn't dare," Theo says quietly. "That's what you wish? Political transformation?"

"Why else do you think I aligned with Harry?" Daphne turns the page of her book. "My father's work can only go so far. In the new Wizengamot that rises from all of this, I know what I have to do."

"You are using Harry for political gain," Theo says flatly.

"Yes," Daphne says.

"Stalk the lion indeed," Theo mutters.

"Harry is not the lion," Daphne's eyes flash. "The Wizengamot is. Harry is only the pebble that breaks the water. I shall ride the ripples."

Theo stares at her.

"You have plans," he says slowly.

"I think you will find that you and Harry are the only ones who are not thinking about the full impact of what your choices are," Daphne says quietly. "He is not the only pebble breaking the water."

"No," Theo sighs impatiently, staring up at the ceiling. "I am not a pebble. I'm the idiot diving into the water after him."

"You would make less of a mess if you jumped together," Daphne snorts. "You should trust him."

"I trust Harry," Theo says automatically.

"If you trusted him completely you wouldn't be so disturbed right now," Daphne says simply.

"I am not disturbed."

"You are being utterly tiresome and rude, just as you were when you and Harry fought about his father, just as you were when Blaise revealed his consort-shield vow," Daphne sighs impatiently. "Both times were moments when you struggled to trust Harry's decision-making."

"Interesting interpretation of events," Theo drawls, letting the back of his hand rest against his forehead and closing his eyes. "On the first occasion, Harry went to Grimmauld Place and did not tell me and on the second Harry took a shield vow from Blaise and did not tell me and yet I am the one with trust issues."

"Did he lie to you?" Daphne asks abruptly.

"No," Theo snaps, "but he kept things from me, kept people from me."

"Blaise," Daphne's eyes light with a moment of understanding. "You are not angry at them for keeping the vow secret -,"

"I think I am," Theo snorts.

"- you are angry because now Blaise is Harry's," Daphne's voice becomes quieter. "When before, he was yours."

"Blaise has never been mine," Theo says sharply, thinking of Harry pressing his forehead against Theo's, hissing the word in parseltongue in a way that makes Theo shiver. Harry is the only person to have that kind of claim over him. Daphne and Blaise may belong to one another in some way, but they do not possess one another, as Harry possesses Theo. *No one on earth does.*

“He is your friend,” Daphne smiles softly. “Your closest friend, aside from, I flatter myself here, me. Harry has many friends.”

“Very few good ones,” Theo mutters.

“He has Granger and the Weasley clan and Longbottom, at least,” Daphne says, undeterred. “He also has family in the House of Black.”

“That is not real family,” Theo corrects. Daphne does not know that Sirius Black was not Harry’s biological father, but even if he was, Theo would not call the daughters of the House of Black an adequate family. Not that he is any kind of authority on the subject.

“Granger is his Potter sister now,” Daphne goes on quietly. “He has all of these and yet now he also has Blaise.”

“So?” Theo asks curtly. He will not think of pressing his hand to Blaise’s wounded chest, thinking that the last moments he would have with his friend were full of blood and pain.

“Blaise is now bound to Harry for life,” Daphne says. “If anything should happen between you and Harry -,”

“Nothing will,” Theo snarls.

“- then Blaise is duty-bound to protect you but he cannot leave Harry,” Daphne smiles ruefully. “You do not trust Harry to love you forever and if he does not, then you shall not only have lost your love but your friend.”

Theo stares at her, feeling suddenly like he has lost a layer of skin. In his mind, he sees Blaise lying on the floor of Umbridge’s office, he watches the bubble of blood at his lips. *He would not have been there, but for the vow. Because of me and Harry. I nearly lost them both.*

“Sometimes,” he says shakily, “I curse the day you became interested in muggle psychology.”

“That is not psychology, just simple logic,” Daphne snorts. “A series of ‘if so then’ statements. Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Theo swallows hard and stares at the ceiling, blinking rapidly. “There’s smoke on my clothes.”

Daphne says nothing. Theo tries to breathe through his swirling thoughts. *Blaise nearly died. I killed Lestrage. Blaise took Harry’s vow. Harry took Blaise. Harry was dead. I killed Lestrage. Blaise nearly died because Harry took his vow. I killed Lestrage because Harry was dead.* Theo feels rather than thinks of the blame there, but there it is, sharp and agonising. *I am angry at Harry for keeping things from me after everything I did for him. Everything Blaise did.* Theo breathes out as slowly as possible, but it comes in a stuttering gasp. Daphne reaches down and takes his hand and begins to read.

“Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral made. Those are pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him that doth fade but doth suffer a sea change into something rich and strange.”

“I’m not sure this is helping,” Theo whispers.

“It is meant to be sung,” Daphne says regretfully.

“Yes, that’s the main problem,” Theo snorts. “Not my dead father, currently sinking to the bottom of the Irish Sea.”

“Being with Harry has made you crude,” Daphne sniffs.

I was always crude, I just hid it from everyone. Theo doesn’t think anyone could grow up with Apollonius screaming curses at them in Norse and not be crude.

“He had a Canopic jar,” Theo says. Daphne stiffens beside him.

“Did you see any memories?” she asks. Theo is overwhelmed with sudden gratitude because Daphne immediately understands. She knows, with the precision of someone who has carefully watched him for five years, exactly what about the process of destroying Apollonius’ jar would hurt him most.

“No,” Theo shakes his head. Daphne nods. She understands the sting of that without him having to explain and it is incredibly relieving.

“What death was it?” she asks quietly.

“Drowning,” Theo closes his eyes. “Harry used his magic he ... took some of the pain. We ... fought. A bit.”

“What is it? A spirit? Lord, how it looks about! Believe me sir, it carries a strange form. But ‘tis a spirit,” Daphne murmurs.

Theo cannot help himself. He thinks of Harry, walking out of the veil. The look in his eyes as he cast the Patronus, the way Theo knew then that it was not just Prongs but Harry too, that had changed.

“He’s different. He won’t tell me why.”

Theo whispers it like a confession, letting his spare hand flop over his eyes as he fights the sting of tears. Daphne squeezes his hand and says nothing. Theo breathes deeply, inhaling Daphne’s scent, a fresh perfume that reminds him of spring meadows. Harry says Daphne’s magic smells like ginger but to Theo, Daphne is associated with fresh dew on damp petals, of the sweet smells of a spring morning. It calms him.

“Is that why you fought?” Daphne asks. “Because you think him changing will change his love for you?”

Theo takes a shaking breath and allows himself this moment, this bleak moment of weakness. This moment to stop fighting, to ignore Apollonius’ words echoing inside his mind: *we carry on and endure!* To allow himself this raw moment of doubt.

“I don’t know,” he whispers. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

My life and my secrets are his. When he keeps secrets from me, what does that make me?

“Harry is a powerful Lord already. He is strong in ways that I had not anticipated, he has magic that I have only ever read about in books,” Daphne says thoughtfully, “but he is also fifteen and a boy

and profoundly stupid.”

Theo snorts with laughter and turns to face her, catching the sight of her typical, world-weary utterly unimpressed expression.

“Should I take offence on behalf of all teenage boys?” Theo jokes weakly.

“I only mean this to say, that boy stumbles through the universe like an oblivious tornado -,”

“Hurricane,” Theo corrects without thinking.

“- he barely seems to know which way is up in his own life and if he did not have Granger for a best friend I am fairly certain he would have perished long ago,” Daphne continues. “That he loves you is pathetically obvious. That he is one of the least communicative teenagers I have ever had the misfortune to meet is another.”

“You speak as if you were not sixteen yourself, Miss Greengrass,” Theo teases lightly.

“My father always says I have been thirteen going on thirty,” Daphne shrugs.

“Accurate,” Theo says softly, his smile dropping as he thinks of Harry’s reassurances. *I will tell you.* Why does it not comfort him as it used to? “Harry always communicates with me. Usually. But it is much harder now we are ...” *Not sleeping in the same bed, breathing the same air, feeling our bond alive and loving between us.* “Apart. There’s nothing I can do to make it better.”

Daphne’s eyes skip down the page.

"To be your fellow, you may deny me, but I'll be your servant whether you will or no," she recites softly. Theo swallows hard and stares at the ceiling, feeling the sting behind his eyes that he will not give into. “You are a consort, Theodore. It has its burdens.”

“I am not,” Theo breathes out slowly, closing his eyes. *Not yet. Maybe never.* “I am useless.”

The weight of his failures is crushing the breath out of him. *I couldn’t save Harry. I couldn’t save Apollonius.* Theo wonders what kind of Son of War he is when he continues to fail to protect the people he should be protecting?

“You are not,” Daphne’s voice is suddenly fierce. “You are many things, Theodore, you are arrogant and acerbic and abominably abrasive -,”

“Nice alliteration,” Theo mutters.

“- but you have never been useless. Your father raised a warrior but you are more than that.”

“I do not feel like more,” Theo whispers. A voice that sounds like Apollonius’ echoes in his mind. *If you cannot fight and win, what is the point of you, Son of War?*

“You only feel useless because you haven’t been able to fight a war for Harry but some things cannot be fixed with blades and wands or even Harry’s power,” Daphne says, her voice cold with her ferocity. “You are not useless, you only feel useless because Apollonius’ skills are useless here. So what are your other skills, Theodore?”

He thinks of Lovegood's words in the astronomy tower when Harry was taken: *when you cannot defend or scheme, then it is time to learn*. Daphne is right. Apollonius raised him to fight but whatever is going on with Harry won't be fixed that way. The yawning ache inside Theo's heart can't be fixed with that. His mind drifts to his mother's box. *As I am his son, I am also hers*.

"Healing," Theo whispers. "Scheming. Learning."

Daphne looks at him with fond frustration and then reaches down to press a cool finger against his cheek.

"*Heart be the bolder*," Daphne mutters gently. For a moment, he's taken back to a particularly vicious summer between first and second year. He had met Daphne and Blaise for one day in London to purchase books. It was before he had the skill for glamours and his sleeve had slipped. Blaise was full of tight-lipped fury and insisted on purchasing his books. Daphne was unchanged until the moment Blaise twisted away to make the purchase. She had looked at him gently and stroked an index finger against his cheek. "*Alleanza*," she had whispered. Her finger had been cold. Theo had been comforted. When he went home to his Aunt, her word echoed in his mind. It was enough to help him endure. He hears Apollonius' words inside his mind: *he is dead. Now we move on and we fight and endure*.

"*Alleanza*," Theo whispers.

"Yes," Daphne says simply. "You are not alone, Theodore."

Funny, because I feel so very lonely. Theo swallows it down. For even in his loneliness, Daphne is here. He might not believe her words but they are kind to say and even though kindness spears him through the heart right now, even though it causes something to ache inside him that is red-raw and bleeding since Harry fell through the veil, Theo finds that a part of him is still grateful.

"Thank you," Theo whispers. Then he allows the plaintive sadness of his heart to leak out, to speak the words that are giving him, oddly, the uttermost complete distress at this moment: "He's going to Rome for the OWLS and he might ... I don't know when I'm going to see him again."

"Hmm, that is shocking," Daphne said drolly. "For it's not as if we have a best friend who lives part of the time in Rome."

Theo stares at her. Daphne tuts and rolls her eyes. "Harry and Blaise's exams will be finished in two weeks, correct?"

"Yes."

"Well, that seems like perfect timing," Daphne says. "I have a mind to take Tori out for the fashions, she needs some new robes next year."

"You do your shopping in Rome?" Theo says, starting to grin.

"Where else?" Daphne shrugs and turns the page of her book. "Perhaps a detour to the Castello could be arranged."

Harry, in Rome. *I could see Harry in Rome*. Theo stares at Daphne, trying to control the frantic surge of excitement in his chest.

"I can't go as myself," Theo says. "I can't be seen with him."

Theo knows one thing for sure. He cannot go and walk by Harry's and Blaise's side whilst they pretend to be a couple. Not this time. This time, he needs to be able to hold Harry's hand.

"It's a good thing I bought a new book on glamours then," Daphne says, pulling a book out from the other side of the bed. Theo looks at the cover: *Glamours, Guises and Charms of Concealment*.

"That is not a NEWT level textbook," he says.

"And you are not a NEWT level charms student," s he holds the book out to him but gives him a stern look, holding it just out of reach. "If you cannot learn an adequate glamour from this in two weeks then not only are you not the Theodore Nott I am acquainted with, you don't deserve to go to Rome."

Theo laughs. He doesn't expect to, it feels wrong on a day like this, but he does.

"Weasley was right, you know. It is quite possible you are the smartest girl on the bloody planet," Theo says, grinning at her as he takes hold of the book.

"Don't be facetious, without proper data collection you cannot make that assertion," Daphne scowls at him. "If you speak nonsense, I shall not enable you to have your second date."

"Second date?"

"Well, unless you've had a secret second date since Valentine's Day, this would be your second," Daphne says, allowing a slightly indulgent smile to twitch at the corners of her mouth. *A second date*. Immediately, Theo thinks of his educational correspondence with Granger in February.

"Roses," he says.

"Excuse me?" Daphne frowns.

"Muggle dates have roses," Theo explains, "and pizza."

"Two things that are plentiful in the city of the Seven Hills," Daphne says, rolling her eyes before nudging Theo's shoulder with her own. "Doesn't it seem like the perfect location for a surprise second date?"

Theo grins wider and stares up at the ceiling. A second date with Harry in Rome at the end of his exams. Rome in July. His head is full of suddenly golden thoughts. He imagines the sunshine on the ancient monuments, Harry's hand warm in his as he shows him the Trevi fountain, buying Harry gelato and watching him fight with Kreacher over it, Harry's face careless with joy, as it had been on their last date. Just the thought of it, the promise of a date with Harry, might be enough to get him through the next two weeks without him. Since he can't fight, he'll scheme up a perfect Roman date and he'll learn. He'll utilise the Greengrass library and he'll try and make sense of everything he doesn't know. There are questions, so many questions, and if there is one thing Theodore Nott can do, it is finding answers.

Your father raised a warrior but you are more than that. Daphne's words settle into his bones. *I shall be more.*

For the first time today, Theo feels the flickering of something inside him. It's not hope exactly, but it's powerful, something surging him out of his heavy apathy, compelling him to action. It's a plan. It's something to do. As long as Theo has something to do and a date with Harry to look forward to, he'll be okay.

"Yeah," he sighs happily, imagining how beautiful Harry's green eyes will look in the bright Italian sunshine, before cracking the spine of the textbook. "It certainly does."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

The Last Will and Testament of Sirius Black

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm)

This time, Severus is frustrated with Sirius.

Next time, Severus is frustrated with the Goblin King.

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

“Can we apparate into Gringotts?” Harrison asks as Severus leads him out of the Nott castle. Severus nods.

“Weasley has sent a particular address of a certain room from a selection of rooms that Gringott’s maintains for this purpose. They and they alone can be accessed via apparition but first -,” Severus guides Harrison down towards the white metal swing seat and turns to face him, abruptly.

“The Canopic Jar,” Severus says.

“Weird,” Harrison shakes his head. Severus tries not to be irritated that he was not permitted to see the Canopic jar’s destruction, especially because the statistics coming out of Severus’ ring, the charm linked to Harrison’s hidden bracelet, show him that Harrison’s temperature dropped dramatically low as if he was plunged into freezing water. Still, Narcissa had held him back, speaking about ‘adolescent independence’ and he had been forced to stand, jaw clenched, waiting for his child to return. He had been secretly grateful when the patronus from Lupin had arrived, calling them both away, giving him an excuse to check on Harrison.

“What did you do?” Severus asks. “Your temperature dropped suddenly, your heartbeat quickened.”

“Oh,” Harrison scowls and looks stubborn for a moment. “Theo was in pain, with the death so I .. helped out a bit.”

“How?” Severus asks sharply because Harrison’s words are irritatingly vague. ‘Helped out’ could mean anything from holding somebody’s hand to trying to murder a basilisk with an ancient sword.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Harrison looks at him defensively. “Just ... like, a blood magic thing.”

“Just a blood magic thing?” Severus repeats. He thinks of the memory Lupin shared with him in the Hogwarts hospital wing. *Harrison, standing with Black’s hand over his mouth, Black’s power and magic coursing through him, the Prince wolf towering and roaring above him.* Anyone could see that for what it was, anyone versed in ancient magics like him or Lupin or Narcissa. Blood magic. “You performed something similar to what you did with your godfather in the Ministry of Magic?”

“No, I ...” Harrison sighs and runs a hand through his hair, which is rumpled from the sea air and his horizontal tousling with Theodore which Severus is very deliberately not thinking about. *Not now.* “Sahara says the blood magic can happen when I ... taste people’s blood or when I’m ... kissing someone.”

Harrison flushes bright red and Severus stands in the insanity of the child’s statement. *He breaks the law every time he kisses Theodore Nott?*

“It is my recommendation that you never tell anyone about that,” Severus says sternly.

“Because it’s weird as fuck?” Harrison mutters.

“Because blood magic is illegal in this country,” Severus says.

“Why?” Harrison frowns. It is on the tip of his tongue to say, *because it is, you irritating child*, but it is hardly a fair comment. Wixen children do not need to be told blood magic is illegal because wixen children do not naturally engage in blood magic. Whilst a wixen child might show a natural aptitude for charms or transfiguration or potions, It is unheard of for a wixen child to show an untaught ability for blood magic. Harrison, it seems, is different.

“Because blood magic is some of the most powerful magic on earth. It is beloved of Dark Lords globally, thus, it is not beloved by the Ministry of Magic.” Severus says simply.

“Why is it powerful?” Harrison asks and Severus tries not to be worried that Harrison has been merrily using blood magic for the last year without even understanding what it is.

“Because blood magic allows you access to another person’s magical core,” Severus says patiently.

“Yeah,” Harrison looks down at his feet with a frown. “When I sent the patronuses in Grimmauld Place, I was kind of ... I guess boosting Arthur? Then, with Sirius I was ... I was too tired so I guess I was using his magic to power the wolf.”

Severus notices the child does not talk about Theodore. Severus is not sure if he wants to know what’s been happening or if he needs to know, immediately. *They have a fidelity bond, their magical cores, and their souls are likely already intertwined.* Severus tries not to think about that because when he does, he thinks about the conversation he would inevitably need to have with Lupin and that makes him very, very tired.

“On one of those occasions, you likely poured your own magic into Arthur’s core and with Black, you drew on his power to survive,” Severus sums up. “So imagine the damage that could be done, the pain that could be caused with that in the hands of an unscrupulous individual.”

“Does Tom use it?” Harrison asks, eyes shrewd.

“He does, but he uses it in a way that is wildly different to what you have described, what you have shown,” Severus says slowly, not wanting to draw comparisons between his child and the Dark Lord. “He uses it for ritual sacrifices, to control people more fully. He was taught by someone who was renowned for it.”

“Who?” Harrison asks.

“Gellert Grindewald.”

“They knew each other?”

“They were acquainted, I believe.”

Severus does not know the depth of the Dark Lord’s connection with Grindlewald or how Albus is tangled in it, but he knows, from cryptic warnings over the years, Albus is disquieted by the notion that Grindlewald has passed on some of his skills to the Dark Lord.

“Is there a club or something?” Harrison mutters churlishly. “Like Scouts for Evil Wizards?”

Yes, Severus thinks, the Slytherin common room, between 1941 and 1980.

“Today, with Theodore, did you draw on his power?” Severus asks.

“No, he was drowning so I pulled the drowning out of him,” Harrison says factually as if it’s not the oddest collection of words Severus has ever heard. “Drowning sucks.”

“It felt like you were drowning?”

Sweet Circe, will this child ever stop throwing himself into the path of danger?

“Yeah, a bit.”

“This is why you were cold?” Severus asks, feeling anger building up inside him.

“I guess,” Harrison shrugs. “I’m fine now with the warming charm.”

Severus stares. He wishes the wolf was here to speak calmly and rationally because Severus wants to yell at the child so fucking badly. *Why are you an idiot, you superpowered whirlwind?* Severus sighs and tries to count backwards but it isn’t possible, so he must speak, even if he says the wrong thing.

“I would like you to listen to me, Harrison,” he begins.

“Okay.”

“Do not do something like this again.”

“He was drowning!”

“The answer to that is not that *you* drown instead,” Severus glares. It is an uncharitable thought, but he would drown many Theodores to ensure Harrison’s wellbeing. “The answer is that you call for one of the two adults who were waiting outside the door.”

“Theo didn’t want to,” Harrison snaps churlishly.

“When it comes to your health I care little what Theodore wants,” Severus snaps. He is trying not to lose his temper but it is very difficult. *What wouldn’t Harrison do for Theodore?* It is worrying that Severus cannot think of anything.

“Not you too,” Harrison huffs. “I just tried to stop him drowning and everyone’s pissed at me about it.”

By ‘everyone’ Severus can only assume he means ‘Theodore.’ Severus does not have time to parse out whatever argument Harrison and Theodore might have had, he is only grateful that Theodore at least saw the madness in Harrison’s actions. He offers Harrison his arm to grip, their tethers tightening together.

“Are you ready?”

“To hear Sirius’ will read? Yeah, fucking over the moon about it,” Harry snorts. Severus can see the tightening in his son’s jaw, the slight tic there that is a tell of his anxiety. Severus is not a fan of this plan, to quickly try and have the will read before Albus can get wind of it but neither does he see an alternate option.

“Language,” Severus mutters, raising his wand. “Please hold tightly.”

Severus twists and they apparate, landing in an underground chamber of Gringotts, a small, circular room rough-hewn out of shiny grey rock. Beside him, Harrison stumbles.

“Jesus,” he mutters, staggering against Severus who finds himself holding the boy up. Harrison is blinking rapidly and looking dazed. It is the second time that they have apparated today and the second time it has produced this reaction.

“It is only because you are still weakened,” Severus says lowly, rubbing Harrison’s back. He scowls darkly but doesn’t move, looking as if he might vomit. “It shall get easier.”

“It better,” Harrison mumbles. Severus knows what the boy means. The last thing Harrison will stand for at the moment is any more physical weakness.

“Ward!” A friendly voice calls out. Severus looks up to see Bill Weasley holding the door open for them. He’s grinning, his new blue eyes sparkling. Severus tries not to remember how Arthur did the same. “How’s the hand? Ready for axe practise yet?”

“Nope,” Harrison lifts his bandaged hand. “Bloody useless.”

“Give it time,” Weasley grins as Harrison and Severus walk through the open door, Severus watching to see if Harrison is steady on his feet. “We’ll have you back to swinging your axe in no time.”

“Delightful,” Severus mutters. That is exactly what the child needs right now - access to weapons.

“By the way, traditionally you should name your weapon, according to *Anzar* law,” Weasley says, leading them happily along the corridor. Severus thinks that for a man who recently became Head of the House of Weasley and lost his father, he is looking remarkably level-headed. Severus notices Harrison looking up at the man in relief as if he expected every Weasley family he met to be furiously disappointed with him. *Of course he does*, Severus realises, *he believes he is responsible*.

“Really? What’s yours called?” Harry asks.

“*Felak*,” Weasley says. “It’s a khuzdul word. It means Hewer.”

“Apt,” Severus mutters, thinking of Ashal Travers’ skull that was hewn in two by Weasley’s axe.

“Huh, that’s cool.” Harrison seems to think for a moment. At least he looks less pale than he did and less sick. “Does it have to be a khuzdul word?”

“Traditionally,” Weasley says merrily.

“I doubt there is a khuzdul word for ‘a terrible idea,’” Severus says drily.

“*Sablanthmîn*,” Bill says, “although that actually translates as ‘cause to fail.’”

“Accurate,” Severus mutters since he cannot imagine more of a failure of an idea than the concept of anyone giving his whirlwind child a bloody axe.

“Rude,” Harry counters.

“We’ll discuss it later,” William grins and opens a door in the shining stone wall. “Come, everyone is waiting.”

“Everyone?” Harry echoes, a hint of panic in his voice. William steps aside.

“Harry!” A clamour of voices. A sea of faces. Seated behind a wide desk in a cave-like room that is clearly carved out of rock that has streaks of gold running through it is the Goblin King himself, looking tremendously smug, the Potter account manager at his shoulder. Sat in the four chairs in front of the desk are Andromeda and Nymphadora Tonks and the Weasley twins. Leaning against the wall looking about as pleased to be there as Severus feels is Lupin, but Lupin is not Severus’ focus at this moment. Harrison has stopped in his track and is hissing under his breath in parseltongue. The spell on the bracelet Harrison always wears on his wrist tells Severus, with a sharp heat under his Prince ring, that Harrison’s heart rate is elevated. *Well, shit*. It is to be expected, after all, this group of people are those who rescued Harrison from the Ministry, minus Black. Severus steps in front of the boy, shielding him from the others.

“Breathe,” Severus intones quietly, staring down into those frantic, bright eyes. For a millisecond, it is just as it is in the *Ghare Tareaqi*, when all there is are his son’s eyes, burning, always burning. Harrison takes a shuddering breath.

“Harry? Are you alright?” Andromeda steps up beside Severus before he can stop her. Predictably, Severus thinks, in a way that could have been entirely avoided if Andromeda had but a glimmer of foresight, Harrison flinches violently, physically recoiling and stepping back from the woman who looks so much like his captor.

“Breathe,” Severus says, placing his hands on Harrison’s shoulders but the child is struggling to get air into his lungs.

“What is wrong with Ward?” King Ragnok booms behind them.

“Bellatrix,” Lupin says.

“Oh shit,” Severus hears George sigh.

“Should have expected it,” Fred comments.

“Harrison,” Severus says, bending his head down to try and catch Harrison’s eyes again. When he does, finding desperate peridot green swirling with panic, a sharp memory fragment falls into Severus’ mind. *Harrison is thrashing against stone and metal all around him, screaming in pain*

and then Bellatrix charms his mouth shut. Too much noise, you horrible blood traitor brat. Severus sees the tears in Harrison's eyes, the silent scream before he falls unconscious. Severus takes a quick breath and takes hold of his child's hand, the right one with the Prince ring on and strengthens the tethers between them. Severus rounds on Andromeda, gesturing to her face. "Do something about that."

"Excuse me?" Andromeda splutters.

"You look too much like her," George Weasley says sagely, which is good because Severus is two seconds away from snapping at the woman.

"Sorry," Harrison is mumbling now, legs shaking. Severus sees his left hand curl into a fist and knows that he is deliberately putting pressure on the self-inflicted wound he made last night. *Oh, no you don't.* Severus slides his fingers between Harrison's fingernails and the wrapped pad of his left palm.

"Breathe," Severus commands, because in this group of people he still has a cover of sorts to maintain. Here he is not a father, he is merely a grudging ally. He cannot say what he wishes he could say. *Breathe, farzandam. I am here. You are safe. She will never touch you again.* He tries to leave the words behind his eyes for whatever kind of extraordinary mind magic Harrison casually uses, but the child has his green eyes tightly shut with panic so it does no good. All he can do is wait for Harrison to resurface.

"In your own time, Healer Tonks," Severus snaps.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry -," Harrison whispers.

"No, I understand," Andromeda whispers back. She twists away and gestures to Weasley. "Could you -?"

"Of course, I've got something." Out of the corner of his eye, Severus sees Weasley slip a bracelet onto Andromeda's wrist and then, suddenly, her hair is changing. It's no longer wild and curly and dark like her sister. It's mid-length and pale pink like her daughter and when she turns around, she looks like an older version of Nymphadora. Severus nods approvingly and hears Harrison take a stuttering breath of relief.

"Better?" Andromeda asks kindly, though Severus still thinks she could have had the foresight to be more adequately prepared.

"Much," Harrison swallows thickly and looks around. He blushes deeply. Severus is grateful to see the colour returning to his cheeks but regretful that the child looks so embarrassed.

"Go to your godfather," Severus says quietly, giving the child a firm little push towards Lupin since Lupin is always the one to give open affection. Severus gives potions and breathing techniques and firm words. Harrison nods, going a little unsteadily, but walks into Lupin's open arms and Severus sees the boy press his nose into Lupin's shoulder, breathing deeply. No doubt inhaling the scent of mint soap, book dust and chocolate that persists in every item of clothing the wolf owns. Severus knows from experience it is unreasonably comforting.

"All well?" Lupin asks their child quietly. Harry nods mutely and looks at the Goblin King. Severus closes the door behind him and leans against it, noticing that Lupin is watching him out of the corner of his eye. Severus nods minutely. They trust most of these people but not all of them and

there are still secrets to be kept. If they have to run, Remus will hold them off and Severus will take the child. They have this discussion, without words, almost every day. Who will flee and who will stay and fight. It is not the ideal situation for parenting but if he has to be doing it, Severus is glad it is with a werewolf of incredible strength and magical dexterity. Having someone who can rip out a man's spine with one hand is useful. Severus has treated Rabastan LeStrange since the Ministry. Attempting to regrow a spine is almost worse than death.

"Good morning, your Majesty," Harrison says thickly. It sounds like he is croaking the words out. Severus is sure that the instinct to speak in parseltongue is overwhelming. "May all your enemies drown in the juice of pickled brains in the Ministry of Magic."

The Weasley twins snort appreciatively. Andromeda smiles fondly. For the first time, Severus really notices his child's blasé comments that, in the past, he has mistaken for the same type of brazen cockiness that characterised James Potter in his adolescence. Severus sees it for what it is, humour covering terror, and feels the smallest modicum of pride.

"Very proficient, Ward," King Ragnok chortles. "If a little specific."

"Well, I can tell you, very specifically, that it sucks," Harrison says drily.

"I concur," Andromeda adds, sitting back down beside her daughter. She turns to Severus with the same inquiring eyebrow that she had in the diner in Cokeworth. "Are you joining us?"

"Yes," Severus says. There is nothing on earth that will persuade him to leave Harrison now, even if he is currently safely wrapped in the arms of a werewolf.

"Why?" Nymphadora asks blankly. Severus glances at Weasley who gives him a quick, impassive look. Severus understands that however close Weasley might be with the daughter of the House of Black, despite them happily cohabiting in London and entertaining various partners selected from either the Order or the Curse Breakers, he has not revealed this secret to the young Auror. Severus is quietly impressed.

"He's with us," Harrison snaps. That is unexpected. Severus looks at his son shrewdly, catching Lupin's surprised gaze over the top of the child's head. Harrison does not want to be here, Severus could tell as soon as he announced it in Nott's castle. He's been pulled away from his suitor to do something that is no doubt less pleasant than whatever Severus interrupted in Medea Nott's bedroom (Severus makes a quick mental note to never mention it to Lupin, for he would surely try to murder Theodore the next chance he got, and consider buying a book on heart bonding to leave in Harrison's room, though he imagines Miss Granger probably has that all quite thoroughly in hand). It is also possible that Harrison is struggling to be around large groups of people again. None of this entirely accounts for why his usually secretive son has blurted a semi-declaration of alliance with Severus.

"With you?" Andromeda twists around to glare at Severus.

"Obviously," Harrison rolls his eyes. Severus notices Weasley's eyes shoot up. Harrison is usually so good at presenting an indifferent bordering on hatefully disrespectful manner around Severus in public. *What's changed?*

"Severus has been helping Harry with his healing process," Lupin says smoothly, which is good, because Harrison has a brewing scowl on his face and Severus realises with horror, that he does not

know what terrible idea Harrison might be having to either launch himself, bizarrely, on some kind of utterly baffling defence for Severus or an ill-considered back-track. "Since he is qualified."

"There are other healers," Andromeda frowns rudely. "Better healers."

"Is that so?" Severus says softly, refusing to rise to the bait. "Do you have a recommendation?"

"I would think someone who is not a Death Eater might be a good place to start," Andromeda snaps. Severus does not anticipate that relations between him and the first daughter of the House of Black will ever defrost. Andromeda may have cut herself off from her sisters once she reached her twenties, but she never lost track of them. That Narcissa bedded Severus has no doubt crossed her radar. *Sweet Circe, will it always be my lot to deal with the angry siblings of Blacks I have taken to bed?*

"Mum!" Nymphadora groans.

"We all know the truth," Andromeda says tartly, tossing her hair. It was more impressive when it was unruly curls rather than pale pink straight locks that immediately flick back into her face.

"Alliances are one thing, trust is another."

Severus feels as if she could not be more right. After all, Harrison may have an alliance of sorts with Andromeda through the house of Black but that does not mean he would trust her as far as he could throw her.

"Yeah?" Harrison's chin is jutting forward and his tone is veering towards belligerent. Severus knows this will not go well for him. "Well, the *truth* is he's an Onvoter and he's treating Blaise Zabini and Blaise is my boyfriend, so -,"

Severus has to fight his own muscles to stop his eyebrows from shooting up. *Well. That took a turn.*

"Blaise Zabini is your *boyfriend*?" Nymphadora squeaks and then rounds on William, of all people. "You didn't tell me!"

"I didn't know," Weasley says flatly, which Severus suspects is only very specifically true. Weasley may have not known that Harrison is referring to Zabini as his 'boyfriend' but Weasley certainly knew that Zabini and Harrison have been having a courtship of sorts and he certainly knows that Theodore is a factor. Weasley, Severus thinks, is shaping up to be quite a wily Head of the House of Weasley.

"How would it be your business whom I treat or who's partner they are?" Severus drawls, but apparently, this is not of interest to Nymphadora, who seems fully outraged she has been left out of a piece of teenage gossip.

"Did you know?" Nymphadora turns to the twins.

"We thought everyone did," Fred Weasley says breezily.

"Yeah, top Hogwarts gossip for the last six months," George Weasley rolls his eyes.

"Six months?" Nymphadora shrieks.

“We went out on Valentine’s day everyone saw,” Harrison says stubbornly as if he needs to prove his courtship with Zabini. Severus sees Lupin wince, since it was Valentine’s day when Black revealed his profound stupidity by attempting to murder Magnus Bane and stealing Arthur’s wand, *and my son, come to think of it.*

“ *You’re* an Envouter?” Andromeda stares at Severus in annoyance.

“I am,” Severus drawls.

“Envouters are not licensed Healers in this country,” Andromeda huffs.

“For no good reason,” Weasley mutters. Severus glances at him curiously. He had no idea that Weasley knew anything about the Wizengamot’s legislation against Envouters, but perhaps it is something to do with his work abroad.

“With very good reason!” Andromeda snaps, staring at Severus with disdain. “They are runic cowboys.”

“What the fuck is a runic cowboy?” Harrison frowns. Severus gives him a sharp glare. *Language.*

“It’s a very distasteful term for a Healer who works in Runes,” Lupin says quietly, eyes flashing at Andromeda in a way that makes Severus’ stomach flip.

“Dark runes,” Andromeda mutters, crossing her arms.

“Like curse breakers do?” Weasley challenges calmly.

“And Rune scholars?” Lupin adds.

“And goblins?” Griphook growls.

“But where do the cows come in?” Harrison demands.

“Excellent, Harry,” Fred Weasley chortles, leaning back to give him a high five which the boy accepts, baffled.

“If we all only used light magic we would struggle to function as a society,” Severus says blithely.

“You would say that,” Andromeda says darkly, “but some things are not worth the functionality.”

“Like my leg?” Lupin says pleasantly.

“The same healing can be achieved without resorting to the type of methods he uses,” Andromeda gives Severus a filthy stare. “I heard you regrew a spine, Professor Snape. How many soul runes did that take?”

“Is it any of your business?” Severus drawls. *Five*, he thinks, and Lestrage bears the weight of them so heavily he shall never stand again but the Dark Lord wanted him to live so he is. In misery.

“I am healer, of course, it’s my business,” Andromeda looks thoroughly disgusted. “Poisonous methods poison the well.”

“Hang on, this sounds like utter balls,” Harrison frowns. “Doctors give cancer patients chemo, it’s literally poison, but if it gets rid of the cancer, who cares?”

“What’s cancer?” Nymphadora asks blankly.

“A muggle disease,” Andromeda says. “Chemotherapy is only one of the options used.”

Harrison frowns.

“So ... you’re saying Envouters -,”

“Envouters, Harry,” Lupin corrects him softly and Harrison nods.

“- are like chemo specialists, who can literally save lives, but you’d rather dice around with something less effective just because it uses some runes you don’t like?” Harrison stares at Andromeda. “What about Remus’ leg?”

Severus tries not to smirk because sometimes, Harrison’s lack of knowledge does a beautiful job of exposing the fallacies in wixen thinking. It is glorious to watch.

“It’s not that I don’t like them, Harry, it’s that they’re dangerous and evil and they set a terrible precedent,” Andromeda says in a patient tone that Severus knows will only incense the child. “Some magical means shouldn’t be used. They’re not good.”

“No runes are inherently dark,” Lupin says quietly. “Like arithmantic equations, they are neutral.”

“Oh, don’t give me the philosophy of magic lecture,” Andromeda mutters. “Theoretical and practical applications differ widely, and every Healer knows that certain magic is just bad.”

Severus is not surprised when he sees Harrison roll his eyes. The child is not amenable to the concept of different types of magic being rejected on the basis of an implied moral scale. *Perhaps even less so, since he crossed the veil.*

“People say that about the Black magic and it’s utter bollocks, so if they’re saying it about goblins and curse breakers and runic cowboys -,”

“Envouters,” Severus corrects. He will not let his son get into the habit of calling him a cowboy.

“- then I guess that’s utter bollocks too,” Harrison finishes. “Besides, I know the Black magic and it couldn’t give a shit what you think, and I’d rather Remus had a leg and Blaise be alive, thanks very much.”

“Seconded,” Fred Weasley says. Severus is reminded of the rumour he has heard that the Heir to the House of Zabini has been spending time with the fifth son of the Weasley house.

“I also concur,” Remus says.

“You would,” Andromeda mutters.

“Yeah, because it’s his *leg*,” Harrison says emphatically.

“Wonderful!” King Ragnok barks, leaning back in his chair, nudging Griphook appreciatively, who is grinning at Harrison with pride. “It is always good when Ward visits. His people have the best

fight.”

“They’re not my people, your Majesty,” Harrison mutters, rubbing his scar. Severus is grateful when Lupin calmly pulls his fingers away.

“Well, we are,” Fred chirps up, winking at the boy. “Guardsmen.”

“I am sort of,” Nymphadora wrinkles her nose, nudging her mother. “Right, Mum?”

Andromeda sighs and looks at Harrison.

“You are the Head of the house I was born to, so yes, I suppose that is partially true,” Andromeda looks at Severus dirtily. “Though I may not appreciate some of the other people you call your own.”

“I belong to no one, thank you,” Severus says, glaring back at her, unfortunately catching Lupin’s eye and seeing his amber eyes glow for a small second with a possessive fire. *Unhelpful*. Severus scowls back.

“So we’re all Team Harry!” George says cheerily.

“Yes, we are,” Lupin’s voice is sharp as tempered steel. Severus sees that he is gripping their child tightly. The conversation about whether he should have been left crippled or even bleed out on the basis of magical morality seems to have left him a little tense. “Might we get on with this?”

“Certainly,” King Ragnok shuffles the papers in front of him and hands them to Griphook, smiling darkly. Griphook breaks the seal and leather bonds around the sheaf of papers, unwrapping them, beginning to speak.

“The last will and testimony of Sirius Orion Black, Son of the House of Black -,”

“Wait, son of the House of Black?” Andromeda leans forward. “My cousin died as Lord Black, surely.”

“No, he did not,” King Ragnok says.

“How?” Andromeda frowns.

“Ask Ward,” King Ragnok smiles at Harrison. Severus sees a glimmer of fascination and stiffens slightly. He remembers the Goblin King’s words about Harrison in the Silver Hall when they had visited Albus there. *He is more than he looks, is he not? And he looks more to begin with.*

“According to Gringotts records, he has been Lord Black since the night of Friday three weeks ago.”

“That’s when ...” George says slowly.

“Grimmauld Place fell,” Weasley says. Severus sees Arthur’s face inside his mind, lying amongst the rubble of a desecrated house. Harrison is staring at his shoes and Severus feels the overwhelming need to stand in front of his child and look into his eyes, just to know what turmoil is going on behind them. If the horror he witnessed in Harrison’s memories earlier are anything to go by, Harrison’s memory of Grimmauld Place will be enough to keep him awake at night. *No wonder he barely sleeps.*

“I shall continue,” Griphook says a little stuffily, shaking the papers. “The last will and testimony of Sirius Orion Black, Son of the House of Black. My estate in its entirety shall be left to Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black, my son in heart and soul.”

Severus sees Harrison swallow. Sees the way that Lupin holds the child even closer. Severus almost sighs in irritation. In death, Black at least upheld the lie that he was Harrison’s father, at least had the good sense to include it in his will. Unless it was written when he still believed, in some corrupt way, he was Harrison’s true father. Severus tries to swallow down his fury when he sees the pained expression on his son’s face. Harrison does need Severus’ prevailing disgust for Black.

“To the appointment of Guardians,” Griphook continues. “Until my son reaches his majority aged seventeen years old, I appoint his godfather, Remus Plutarch Lupin of the Clan Lupin to be his primary guardian with the assistance of Arthur Septimus Weasley of the House of Weasley.”

Lupin sucks in a breath. Harrison turns his face and presses it into the wolf’s jumper. The room is painfully silent.

“If Remus Plutarch Lupin does not survive me or their appointment does not take effect for any reason, I appoint William Arthur Weasley of the House of Weasley as the primary guardian of Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black with the assistance of Nymphadora Constance Tonks of the House of Black.”

Severus did not expect Black to name him, if Black had named him it would have been so much worse, but it irks Severus all the same. Nymphadora looks stunned, staring at Weasley with a pale face.

“So that means it’s Remus and Bill?” George interrupts. “Because Dad’s gone?”

“Yes,” Griphook says. Harrison does not lift his head. He blames himself for this. Severus knows he and Remus will have their work cut out for them detaching Harrison from the notion that he is solely responsible for Arthur’s death.

“What is the definition of assistance?” Severus drawls in an attempt to move the conversation on.

“I am getting to that,” Griphook says, sounding irritated. “Assistance is defined as: the assistant guardian shall be informed of all major life decisions made on behalf of the child and offered input until the age of seventeen.”

Severus almost snorts with laughter. The notion that the child does not already have a whole host of meddling adults weighing in on his life decisions is absurd. Harrison looks like he is thinking the same thing.

“I can make my own bloody decisions,” Harrison mutters into the wolf’s shoulder. Severus sees Lupin’s lips quirk into a smile at this predictable display of teenage grumpiness.

“A unit, remember?” Lupin murmurs, kissing the boy’s head affectionately. Severus feels a twist in his gut to see it, to see the casual, unbridled affection between his son and his lover, of two-thirds of the unit that he is the remaining implied piece of. He feels the urge, suddenly, to be standing beside Lupin, to feel the warmth of Lupin’s body beside him and to feel the dry warmth of Harrison’s magic nearby. *To know they are both safe and near me.* Lupin is not looking at Severus, he is lifting his eyes to meet Weasley’s. “I’d be happy to have your assistance, Bill.”

“I doubt you need it,” Bill says lightly, eyes catching Severus’. *Since you already have a co-parent who is actually the child’s father.* “Shall we continue?”

“Yes,” Griphook sniffs. “It is not complete.”

“What do you mean?” Andromeda asks.

“Specific gifts of personal possessions.” Griphook flourishes the piece of paper. “To Harrison James Charlus Potter of the House of Potter and the House of Black, I gift the contents of my current home of residence, number twelve, Grimmauld Place -,”

“Which means fuck all since it’s a mountain of rubble,” Fred mutters.

“Shh,” Andromeda chides.

“To Remus Plutarch Lupin of the Clan Lupin I leave the Chateaux at Angouleme -,”

“A house?” Lupin repeats faintly. “A house for me?”

“Yes, quite obviously,” Griphook snarks. “To Remus Plutarch Lupin I leave the Chateaux at Angouleme on the proviso that he does not sell it for at least ten years for tax purposes, and that any other property he purchases with the sale of the house is not in the United Kingdom.”

“That’s weird,” George comments.

“Not when you consider werewolf legislation in this country,” William says softly.

Severus is staring at the wolf. His face is supremely blank, the scars across it standing out more pale than usual. Aside from shacking up with Black at Grimmauld Place and then his brief stint at Weasley’s flat before his colonisation of Severus’ couch at Spinners End, Lupin has no home of his own. Black, in death, has given something to the wolf that is perhaps more valuable than anything he could have given him in life - a refuge outside of England’s terrible werewolf legislation. It only makes Severus hate Black all the more.

“For you, Moony,” Harrison whispers, rubbing Lupin’s back. Oddly, Lupin does not look emotional or pleased by the notion. Severus does not understand why.

“For us,” Lupin swallows hard and nods to Griphook to continue but Harrison stops him.

“Who gets Kreacher?” He demands. Griphook looks down at the piece of parchment.

“The elf is not mentioned specifically,” he says. “But since the contents of Grimmauld Place were specified we could assume -,”

“That’s not smart,” Harrison shakes his head. “Kreacher capitalises on people assuming.”

“Harry, Kreacher won’t leave you, he’s devoted,” Lupin says.

“Is he?” George Weasley grins. “When I’m devoted, I don’t steal people’s socks just for a laugh.”

“Or threaten to eat everyone’s ears,” Fred adds.

“That’s not the point, we need to check to keep him safe,” Harrison frowns. “Last time, it was because I wasn’t Lord Black that Bellatrix could use him, I left a back door open and Kreacher was dragged along.”

Severus is curious as to Harrison’s categorisation of the situation. From Severus’ perspective, Harrison survived something impossible and kept Arthur alive at Yule. That Bellatrix killed him later does not seem to register with Harrison as being solely Bellatrix’s responsibility.

“You are Lord Black, Ward,” King Ragnok assures.

“Kreacher’s a grumpy old elf, he loved Bella as a girl, perhaps he wanted to serve her,” Andromeda shrugs. “It’s not your fault, Harry, you can’t indoctrinate some animals.”

“Animals?” Griphook mutters and the Goblin King rolls his eyes, as does Lupin. Andromeda does not seem to notice that she is pissing off the creatures in the room. Severus is not surprised when he sees Harrison’s face darken nastily.

“Well, I’ll ask him,” Harrison snaps. “Kreacher!”

The elf appears. Everyone jumps.

“I thought elves couldn’t apparate into Gringotts?” Nymphadora asks.

“They cannot,” King Ragnok says, staring at Harrison who hasn’t noticed.

“Has a Lord Black ever tried?” Lupin asks, doing a good job of making what seems to Severus to be a blatant cover-up of Harrison’s power look like a simple curiosity.

“I do not know,” the Goblin King says slowly. Lupin’s words do not have seemed to put them off the trail, as Bill is watching Lupin carefully, his eyes flickering between him and Harrison, who is oblivious. He is too busy looking at his elf and sniffing, with a disgusted expression.

“Why do you stink?” Harrison demands the elf. He is emitting a strong smell of vinegar. *Oh God, he found the pickled voles.*

“You found them,” Lupin looks at the elf with irritation.

“Wolf is a terrible hider,” Kreacher cackles.

“Oh am I?” Lupin mutters and Severus tries to avoid pinching the bridge of his nose in despair because clearly the domestic warfare between Lupin and Harrison’s elf will not be concluding any time soon.

“Kreacher, am I your Lord?” Harrison asks brusquely. “Andromeda reckons you quite fancy Bellatrix as your Lord so you might betray me and Sirius didn’t mention you in the will apart from contents of Grimmauld Place -,”

“Kreacher is contents,” Kreacher says, licking vinegar out of his ears with his long tongue. “Kreacher belongs to Master, Master is Lord Black, Kreacher has Master’s protection over his mind now.”

“And you’re not going to fuck off with Bellatrix?” Harrison presses and Severus sees his eyes sparkling like dark emeralds. Kreacher snarls and a little spark of white magic bursts off his skin.

“The second daughter of the House of Black has betrayed our magic and our Master, we will never serve her,” Kreacher’s eyes rest on Andromeda with something like a reproach. “Ever.”

“Well, that’s pretty comprehensive,” Lupin says quietly.

“For an *animal*,” Griphook mutters.

“Staying or going, Kreacher?” Harrison asks. The elf holds out his hand.

“Promised second Twix,” he says, tongue licking his lips.

“Sorry Moony,” Harrison mutters, pulling a chocolate bar out of Lupin’s coat pocket. Lupin sighs heavily as Harrison hands it to his elf.

“Staying,” the elf mumbles, in between smears of chocolate and heavy swallows.

“Staying,” Harrison says, and Severus is happy to see something like comfort in his eyes as he turns back to Griphook.

“To my cousin Andromeda Druella Tonks of the House of Black, I gift ten thousand galleons -,”

“Merlin,” Andromeda mutters, slumping back in her chair. “Sirius.”

“To my cousin Nymphadora Constance Tonks I gift ten thousand galleons -,”

“Woah,” Nymphadora chokes out, grabbing her mother’s hand.

“To the guardsmen of my son, Fred Gideon Weasley and George Fabian Weasley, I gift fifteen thousand galleons for the express purpose of expanding their business to include a branch of merchandise called ...” Griphook sniffs. “Marauders Merchandise.”

“Fucking predictable,” Severus breathes, folding his arms and letting his head fall back against the door for a moment. Lupin is biting his lip and has his eyes closed and Severus cannot tell if he is quietly seething or holding back laughter. Harrison’s face is hidden, pressed into Lupin’s shoulder. The Twins both let out choked sobs, grinning ruefully. Severus decides to recommend to them a black dog stuffed toy for their new line. Then he shall buy fifty and blow them to smithereens.

“Merlin’s balls, Sirius,” Fred shakes his head.

“Of fucking course,” George mutters with a wry grin.

“In the role of Executor of my estate and Steward of the House of Black to guide my son, Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black, in his Lordship, I appoint Arthur Septimus Weasley.”

The room falls silent. Severus sees Harrison’s body tense as he twists his face from the ragged shoulder of Lupin’s dark blue jumper. It seems that this mention of Arthur in the position in which he died is too much. Severus sees a particular look in Harrison’s eyes that somehow, Severus knows is a ‘forming an escape’ look. Harrison may have never taken an apparition test but he can definitely disappear and reappear. He and Lupin have not yet had a chance to talk about it but clearly, Lupin is thinking about it right now, as Severus sees his hand tighten on the boy’s shoulder. Kreacher growls under his breath and grips Harrison’s wrist. Severus clenches his right hand, tugging at the tethering between them. Harrison’s eyes sway reluctantly towards Severus, who, very gently, twitches a finger. He sweeps it up towards his body and then slowly in the other

direction. *Breathe in ... and breathe out.* He sees Harrison take a shuddering inhale and a trembling to exhale. Severus nods.

“In the event that Arthur Septimus Weasley of the House of Weasley does not survive me,” Griphook goes on, “I appoint Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore as Executor of my estate and Steward of the House of Black -,”

“Dumbledore?” Harrison demands, staring at his account manager. “He left me with *Dumbledore?*”

“Actually, Harry, he left with you with Remus and Tonks and me,” William says but the child simply stares at him like he is mad. “But ... yes, he sort of did.”

“That’s as good as making him Harry’s guardian again,” George Weasley scowls. *Which will never happen*, Severus thinks darkly. *Not whilst I’m alive.*

“Classic dick move, Sirius,” Fred Weasley mutters and George nods ferociously.

“The man is dead, you could show some respect,” Andromeda says tartly.

“You did not seem so intent on showing respect whilst he lived,” Severus sneers.

“Coming from you, Professor Snape, that means very little,” she snaps back, which is, Severus grants, entirely warranted.

“What the fuck was he thinking?” Harrison exclaims and Severus glowers at him, thinking *language*. The child’s eyes are slightly glassy, the way they look at the start of a panic attack. Severus feels a twitch in the tethering between him and the boy. This new information is not likely to stop Harrison in his line of thinking of escape. Severus unconsciously tightens the tethers. He knows that this room of Gringotts might be apparition-proof but he does not put it past his son to find a way past it.

“Dogfather did not think,” Kreacher snarks. Severus privately agrees and Harrison sighs heavily, deflating as if the truth of this statement cannot be denied.

“Continue reading, Griphook,” King Ragnok waves his hand.

“And in the event that Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore is unfit to complete these duties or does not survive me -,”

“Which would mean more if he was dead, but he’s not dead,” Fred mutters, looking like he would quite like to make it so.

“- then I appoint Magnus Gaius Bane as the Executor of my estate and Steward of the House of Black to guide my son, Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black, until he reaches the age of majority.”

“Magnus? I could have had Magnus and Sirius gave me Dumbledore?” Harrison stares at Griphook with an incredibly irritated expression. Griphook glares back at Harrison.

“I will remind you, Heir Potter-Black, that is not me who appointed your steward,” Griphook says tautly.

“This is definitely going to complicate things,” Bill says evenly, which Severus thinks is a large understatement, especially if the Goblin King has the plan that Severus imagines he does.

“Not necessarily,” King Ragnok smiles sharply. “After all, as the Executor of the last Lord Black’s will, I decide what an unfit Steward looks like.”

“So you can make Magnus the Steward?” Harrison presses.

“I can raise a concern with the Department of House Guardianships and make a suggestion,” King Ragnok grins. “They usually take suggestions given to them.”

“Good,” Harrison looks relieved. Severus hates to be the one to ruin it.

“The head of the Department of House Guardianships is Victoria Crabbe,” Severus says quietly.

“Shit,” Harrison says. Severus rolls his eyes and wonders how much the child truly wants to learn secret warfare tactics from the goblins since he curses so frequently.

“We can work around it,” Lupin squeezes the boy’s hand. Severus catches Weasley’s eye. *We shall be the ones working around it.* “Is there any more we need to hear?”

“Yes,” Griphook says, taking a deep breath. Severus knows, that despite all of the things he has not enjoyed hearing tonight, he shall enjoy this the very least of all. “In the event that all named Guardians do not survive me or are unable to perform their duties, the guardianship of Harrison James Charlus Potter shall revert back to the muggles, Mr and Mrs Vernon Dursley of number four, Privet Drive -,”

“WHAT?” Harrison yelps and Severus clenches his fists. Sirius Black, it seems, is not finished being a fucking thorn in his side.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

The Games of the Goblin King

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Child abuse)

This time, Severus tangoes with the Goblin King.
Next time, maybe Harry should stop.

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

“What the fuck, Sirius?” George Weasley groans, rubbing a hand over his face.

“It’s not going to happen,” Lupin growls simply but effectively, the rumble of the bass of it echoing off the walls. Severus will not find it appealing.

“Why would he do that?” Fred Weasley sounds incensed, he is staring at Griphook as if he holds him personally responsible for Black’s failings. “*Why?*”

“To protect him,” Lupin says dully.

“Protect me?” Harrison chokes out, twisting his head around to stare at his godfather. Lupin nods tersely. Severus knows what words are coming next, has known since Black’s stipulation was spoken aloud, but it doesn’t make them easier to swallow. It doesn’t look like it’s easier for Lupin to speak either.

“If I’m gone, if Bill is gone, if Tonks is gone, if there’s no one left, then Voldemort can’t touch you there.”

“Voldemort can’t,” George Weasley mutters. Harrison barks with derisive laughter, a horrible sound of disappointment that echoes against the walls, filled with bitterness.

“That’s all that matters, right?” The child croaks out. Severus glares at him, willing words behind his eyes. *You will live, Harrison.*

“Is it binding?” Weasley asks, frowning at Griphook.

“Yes,” Griphook says tersely, “it is the most binding part of the will. It’s a *Khazad-dûm* clause.”

“Shit,” Weasley mutters.

“Explain,” Severus demands quietly.

“It’s an ancient goblin clause,” Lupin answers, because of course the wolf knows. “It acts like a failsafe. None of us can undo it or revoke it even now we are proclaimed guardians, if we are dead, Harry goes back into their custody.”

“They cannot be undone, they are ancient vows to protect our precious heirs,” King Ragnok says gravely. “There is no higher commitment. No alternative contingency can override it.”

Severus catches the Goblin King’s eye. He understands the context. Severus has not claimed his heir. In the eyes of the law, he is Black’s and now Black has enacted a safety that even Severus cannot undo. *One final declaration of hatred from my childhood bully.*

“No,” Harrison whispers and begins to hiss.

“Harry, it’s alright, it’s never going to happen,” Lupin whispers soothingly. The implications behind the words are absurd, for Lupin cannot promise long life for any of Harrison’s caretakers and the child seems to know it. Lupin is holding the boy tightly but he catches Severus’ eye and Severus sees the fury there. They can both easily reason out Black’s logic, that if every defender has fallen before the boy then he should be hidden in the muggle world in the one place the Dark Lord cannot touch him, but the fact that Black did not name Severus as a last resort is profoundly frustrating. It’s a sign of how little Black trusted him that the man still thought Harrison had a better chance of survival with his abusers than in Severus’ care.

“No, no, no, no,” Harrison is chanting, green eyes fixed determinedly into the middle distance. Harrison is shaking his head and Lupin has shifted so that he is holding the child from behind. Severus realises it is to fight tremors and possibly to hold him from disappearing. Severus tightens the tethers. He is not sure Harrison notices. “No, I won’t, no, I *won’t* -,”

“You don’t have to,” Lupin says.

“We won’t let you,” Fred Weasley says firmly, but Harrison is still shaking his head like a worried dog.

“I don’t understand, why does it matter?” Andromeda twists round to look at them. *Because he nearly died in that house a year ago and none of us did a thing to save him.* “After all, three people will have to die before you are seventeen to allow this option to even occur.”

One can always tell individuals who have not spent enough time around Harrison. They have no notion of exactly how much chaos foams up in his wake. Rage alights around Harrison and he struggles in his godfather’s arms.

“I’m not seventeen for thirteen more fucking months!” Harrison yells. “Sirius *knew* that! He fucking *knew*!”

“He was trying to protect you, Harry,” Andromeda says, clearly not reading the signs despite the softness of her voice and the delicacy of her tone. “All he cared about was that you survived and he named three excellent guardians for you -,”

“Four,” Severus puts in coldly.

“Exactly!” Harrison explodes, gesturing at Severus like he has proven his point. “That’s what fucking *happens* to my guardians! Voldemort has got a killing curse waiting for everyone on that list! I’ll be lucky to make it to fucking *Christmas*!”

“Charming,” Bill says drily.

“That was perhaps indelicate, Harry,” Lupin mutters, stroking the child’s hair.

“If not inaccurate,” Severus drawls, receiving an appreciative nod from Harrison.

“I’d still prefer you didn’t put it in those terms,” Andromeda says, wincing and squeezing Nymphadora’s knee. Harrison rolls his eyes. Severus knows personally that Harrison has little tolerance for that kind of delicacy. The child has always fared better when he knows exactly how things may go to shit.

“Yeah? Well, I’d prefer I didn’t have to go back to the *fucking* Dursleys,” Harrison snaps.

“Master must calm down,” Kreacher mumbles and Severus knows the elf can feel it, the stirring of his child’s magic. From the few feet between him and where his son and the wolf stand, Severus feels tension in the tethering between them, feels a swell of dry heat against his face and knows that this possibility, the even slight indication that Harrison would return to his abusers, is too much. Severus knows he must do something.

“It does not matter,” Severus snarls at him, his tone forcing Harrison to look at him. “It is a far-fetched madness of Black’s invention that we waste time dwelling on.”

He hopes that Harrison understands the subtext of his words. *It does not matter what the will says, even if you are sent back there, I will never let you remain there.*

“It matters to me,” Harrison retorts, glaring back at Severus furiously and Severus sees words forming behind his eyes: *What if you’re dead too?* Severus pauses. It is the second time in two days that Harrison has presented this possibility to him. Severus thinks the possibility that the child would mourn him supremely unlikely, but he imagines the fear of losing a protector at a time like this is sharp and it is not an unreasonable assumption to make.

“Listen to the addendum, Ward, before you come out with your axe swinging,” King Ragnok chortles.

“There’s an addendum?” Lupin glares at the Goblin King. The subtext of: *you couldn’t have mentioned this earlier?* Is very loud. The Goblin King merely grins. Severus knows he is very much enjoying this display of Wixen emotions and familial tension.

“Go ahead, Griphook.”

Griphook, Severus thinks, looks like the most heavily put upon goblin he has ever met.

“The guardianship of Harrison James Charlus Potter shall revert back to the muggles, Mr and Mrs Vernon Dursley of number four, Privet Drive -,”

“Wankers,” George mutters.

“Dickfaces,” adds Fred.

“Silence,” Severus says, privately agreeing with both.

“On the condition that Harrison James Charlus Potter is visited weekly by a representative from Gringotts Bank to be assured of his welfare according to a child of the House of Black.”

Well, that’s characteristically useless, Severus thinks, rolling his eyes. *Well done, Black.*

“A child of the House of *Black* ?” Harrison stares at Griphook. “Of the House of *Black*? Are you kidding?”

“Harry,” Lupin says quietly.

“No, come on,” Harrison shakes off his godfather, glaring at the wolf. “Seriously?”

“I believe the condition is for your protection, Ward,” King Ragnok says.

“Yeah, which would mean more if it didn’t say ‘according to a child of the House of *motherfucking Black* !’” Harrison yells. Severus sees an expression that he knows very well, violent, stormy, full of pain. That is how Harrison looks when he feels intensely betrayed. Severus only wishes Black was here to have the full force of it directed at him. Severus knows from experience how gut-wrenching it can be. There is a pulse of magic around him that Severus feels like dry heat. He sees Weasley and the Goblin King stiffen and knows they have felt it too. Oddly, he notices Nymphadora also flinching. *Perhaps metamorphs have innate magical sensing*. Severus and Lupin catch one another’s gaze. *We need to calm him down*. Kreacher sees their glances and, growling, grabs Harrison’s hand and plonks it on his head. Severus fancies he sees flickers of sharp wincing on the elf’s grumpy face, as Harrison’s magic is sparking inside him like an electric current. Still, it seems to calm the child down a little.

“Actually, it doesn’t say that, Harry,” George grins.

“Would be cooler if it did,” Fred comments.

“What’s the problem?” Weasley asks, red eyebrows knitted together. Of course, not everyone is familiar with the utter failings of the House of Black to raise children. At least, not like Severus is. He recalls with a wave of remembered distaste the lash marks turned silvery scars across Regulus’ back.

“I think the latest Black Lord is bringing to light the fact that children have often faced systemic and cruel abuse inside the House of Black,” Severus says quietly. Harrison nods fervently, glancing between Severus and King Ragnok as if hoping that Severus’ word will change things. *If only*. Kreacher chokes on his chocolate bar and glares at Severus but doesn’t say anything. Severus holds his yellow eyes with a steady gaze. Kreacher was devoted to Regulus. There is no conceivable scenario where he did not witness the beatings.

“Be careful of the accusations you make, Professor Snape,” Andromeda says hotly. “You know nothing about it.”

“I think I do,” Severus says sharply. “I am the one who treated the second son of Black’s wounds, after all.”

Kreacher flinches.

“Is he talking about your cousin Regulus?” Nymphadora frowns.

“Yes, the Death Eater,” Andromeda scorns. Kreacher actually growls.

“Do not speak ill of Master Reggie,” Kreacher snarls.

“Master Reggie?” Harrison stares. It seems like only Andromeda and Severus are unsurprised. Both of them remember how Kreacher had adored Regulus above all others in the House of Black. At least until Harrison came along.

“If it is distasteful to speak ill of one dead cousin it is surely distasteful to speak ill of the other,” Severus says, and Kreacher nods vigorously. Andromeda glares at Severus.

“He was marked. It is not ill-speaking if it was true,” Andromeda says. *Because all marked people are, naturally, beyond redemption.* Severus holds the thought back and glares at Regulus’ favourite cousin.

“He was not always marked,” Severus says sharply. He sees Andromeda flinch, likely afflicted by memories of her little cousin, who had followed her around adoringly. “*Meda loves me,*” Regulus says off-handedly as Severus lolls his head against Regulus’ chest as they lie on his bed in the dorm room. “*I don’t care who she marries. Nothing will change that.*” Severus is glad, suddenly, that Regulus never got to see how wrong he was.

“You cannot just make assumptions about all of the children who have lived in the house of Black,” Andromeda’s voice is heated as she shakes her head. “My mother was *not* abusive.”

It’s so expected that it is almost droll, this disbelief of the blessed unmolested child, that Severus almost lets out a mocking bark of laughter. *Fucking typical.* Then he sees the crumpled expression on his son’s face and knows, viscerally, that despair of not being believed. He will not, he cannot endure that expression. *I believe you, farzandam.*

“Lucky you,” Severus sneers, his voice like acid, turning the weight of his wrath on Andromeda, since Lady Black is already dead and if she were not, Severus would have killed her for Regulus long ago. “Your Aunt was.”

Andromeda’s face crumples. Severus hopes she is remembering Regulus’ sweet eyes and playful smile. He wants to watch her regret, but his own child has caught his attention. The bluntness of his phrasing seems to light something in Harrison because his expression transforms into fierce determination, it’s like a rainbow, cowed despair to indignant purpose. It is glorious.

“Yeah, and so’s *mine*,” Harrison says, his eyes snapping back around to the Goblin King. “So if I’m going to be forced to go back there could I at least have a fucking standard set which like, I dunno, stops that from happening?”

Severus stares at his son, the boy who has implicitly used the word ‘abusive’ to describe Petunia in a way he has never done in the past. Severus catches Lupin’s eye and a hot feeling of victory soars between them. *He said it. He believes it. This is something.*

“Excuse me, she’s *what*?” Andromeda asks with her eyes narrowed. Nymphadora’s face is full of shock, no doubt from hearing the dirty laundry of her family aired for the first time but also from seeing Harrison in a new light. After all, she did not hear his voicemail message to Granger last summer.

“Not now,” Lupin says sharply. *Also, not your business,* Severus adds inside his head.

“Harry, we are not all going to die before you are seventeen,” Nymphadora says soothingly, face pale. *Seer; is she?* Severus snorts to himself.

“Yeah? Got a guarantee, have you?” Harry glares at her, in an uncanny reflection of Severus’ own mind. “Tell that to Sirius.”

And Arthur, Severus adds silently.

“We’d take you,” Fred says firmly. “We’d help you run away.”

“Again,” George mutters. *The accursed flying car.*

“What if you’re dead too?” Harry demands.

“Holy Merlin, Harry, how many of us are you expecting to die?” George asks. Severus lifts his eyes to meet Lupin’s. The answer to the question flows easily between them: *He expects us all to die, including him.* Harrison merely glares expectantly at the Goblin King.

“So?” the child demands. “Do I have to go back, when everyone’s dead?”

“So pleasant,” Andromeda mutters. Severus sees his child flush with embarrassment and is suddenly furious again. *She will not make him feel paranoid when his feelings are completely reasonable.*

“In this hypothetical, you shall also be dead, so does it matter to you if it is pleasant?” Severus drawls coldly.

“Kindly don’t speak of my death, Professor Snape,” she snarks back with a filthy look.

“Well?” Harrison ignores her, staring at the Goblin King with a familiar, indolently stubborn expression that Severus used to despise and still finds enraging. In return, King Ragnok assesses the child slowly, tapping his silver-tipped nails against the large oak desk. Severus wonders if any other wixen, any other creature has ever spoken to him with such casual disregard for his status. Severus knows what it feels like to be on the receiving end of this particular disrespect, the belligerent, unwavering lack of care for social graces that are uniquely Harrison’s. Oddly, it does not seem to vex his Majesty.

“In your assessment, Ward, how many years, whilst under the care of the magical guardianship of Albus Dumbledore, before your true parentage was uncovered and Lord Black took up his role as a parent, were you kept in an unsuitable household?” King Ragnok asks quietly. Severus sees the direction in which the goblin King’s mind runs and smirks. *Very inventive.*

“Are you asking how long I lived with the Dursleys?” Harrison asks blankly.

“Fourteen years,” Lupin says. King Ragnok’s eyes flash sharply but he nods to Griphook.

“Continue,” he says quietly.

“No, wait,” Harrison says, Griphook giving him an annoyed look. Severus imagines that whilst the Goblin King can muster up requisite indulgence to deal with Harrison the same cannot be said of his account Manager. Harrison looks at the Goblin King. “You can’t change it? The bit about the Dursleys?”

“I cannot, but I can assure you that a goblin assessment of what is a suitable home for a child of Black would be of a higher standard than Sirius Orion Black and his brother experienced in their home,” King Ragnok says, grinning nastily. “We would also implement punishments when the standards were not met.”

“So would Kreacher,” Kreacher mutters.

Severus can only imagine what delightful punishments the goblins would cook up for Petunia and her hideous husband, especially when combined with a horrifying house elf. Severus thinks it would almost be worth them all dying just to see it, however, it is time to move Harrison on. Severus does not want him to dwell on his previous guardians if possible. Not after last night.

“Could we move on from theoretical circumstances that bear no relevance?” Severus drawls, catching his son’s eye. *I would kill the Dursleys before you are ever returned there.* Harrison is becoming more and more proficient at catching the meaning inside his words because the child looks comforted.

“Yes, are we done?” Lupin echoes shortly. Severus can feel that his worries run in the same vein as Severus’. Harrison has already had his longest day since he woke up from the coma. Anymore and Severus worries he will simply collapse.

“The reading is complete,” Griphook says, rolling it up, and Severus feels relief spread around the room. “There is something Lord Black must deal with in the Black vault before he leaves. Weasley will take you there.”

“There are some private matters we must manage with Ambassador Lupin,” King Ragnok says, his eyes landing on Severus, “and Mr Snape.”

Severus does not know if this is true or if it is just a way for the Goblin King to weed out those who are not privy to deeper secrets but he does not really care. He is simply glad it is over and Black has not left any standing instructions for someone to infuriate Severus for all eternity in Black’s place.

“Well, we’re off then,” Fred says cheerily, slapping his hands on the arms of his chair and standing up. He passes Harrison and gives him a flicker of a wink. “You alright, littlest brother?”

“Yeah,” the child nods. “Fine.”

How easily he lies, Severus thinks to himself.

“Come visit us, Harry,” George says quietly, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ve got a spare room in our flat if you ever need to stay.”

“Yeah, we’ll go out in muggle London! We’ll hit the pubs!” Fred says.

“Harry is fifteen,” Lupin reminds them gently as Severus scowls, thinking that on top of everything else, the idea that he might have to worry about his son drinking underage is just ludicrous. Consequently, Harrison will go to stay with the Twins in London over Severus’ cold, dead body.

“Sixteen in a month,” Harrison scowls.

“It still makes you two years under the legal drinking age,” Severus drawls and Harrison hisses something which is no doubt rude, under his breath.

“Later, milord,” Fred chortles, and Severus swears he sees him passing a handful of sweets to Kreacher. Over his shoulder Severus can see George leaning pulling Harrison out of Lupin’s arms for a hug, whispering something in his ear too low for Lupin to hear. Severus is suddenly reminded, with a painful jolt, that the twins are not returning to Hogwarts. That they are out in the world,

running a joke shop but also, by a vow taken to an unpredictable Mage child, more in the line of the Dark Lord's wand than ever before. Then there is Dolohov, who is taking George's attempt to drown him in three feet of water incredibly personally. Severus carefully catches Fred's arm.

"Duelling lessons," Severus says lowly so that no one but Weasley, who Severus thinks is probably primed to listen to all low-pitched conversations that include his most troublesome brothers, can hear. "Both of you. I will send you an owl."

Fred Weasley raises his eyebrow but nods, joined by his brother as he leaves.

"I am going back to Mungo's," Andromeda says, standing up and turning to Lupin. "If you have need of my skills, Remus, do call."

Severus doesn't even bristle. Really, what would a meeting of this kind be without someone of the House of Black treating him like an untrustworthy spy? Oddly, it's Harrison who scowls at her and stuffs his hands into his pockets.

"We're fine, thanks," he says tersely. Severus sees a ripple of white magic up Harrison's left wrist. Andromeda's eyes widen for a second and then Andromeda looks Severus up and down with an imperious stare.

"Anything else?" Severus challenges quietly. Andromeda shakes her head, her eyes smouldering.

"You always find a way to be exactly what someone needs, Envouter Snape," she says coldly. Severus can tell it is not a compliment. For the first time, Severus wonders if Andromeda hates him more for being a Death Eater or more for loving and understanding Regulus and Narcissa, her own cousin and sister, more than she ever could. Abruptly, Andromeda turns to Weasley and Nymphadora, nodding at where they stand close together.

"Walk me back?" Andromeda says quietly to her daughter.

"Sure," Nymphadora nods. Severus gets the feeling that she will be receiving the brunt of her mother's complaints about this meeting. Predominantly about him, Severus imagines. Once the guardsmen and the daughters of the House of Black have left, King Ragnok rises from his chair, looking at Harrison with an inscrutable expression. He dismisses Griphook in *khuzdul* and the bank manager nods, walking to the door.

"We will need to discuss your Potter heirship, Lord Black," Griphook says quietly.

"Another time," Lupin says, an arm around Harrison's shoulder. The child has had enough for one day. Griphook inclines his head.

"May all of your enemies be vanquished, Lord Black," Griphook says.

"Thanks," Harrison smiles at his account manager, a little tiredly. "May all of yours have their fingers and toes devoured by house elves."

"Goblin toes are delicious," Kreacher growls.

"I hear it on good authority your toes are delicious," Harrison says.

Griphook grins widely and chortles his way out of the room, the Goblin King shaking his head in what Severus can only think of as a fond expression.

“You are an interesting servant, elf Black,” the Goblin King grins. “With an interesting Master.”

Kreacher snarls back nastily.

“Master will be the darkest greatest Lord of all,” Kreacher cackles proudly. Severus resists the urge to slap a hand over his own face as Lupin sighs heavily. Weasley does not smile.

“Jesus, stop telling people that!” Harrison scowls at his elf, nudging his ears with his elbow. “Go home!”

Severus ignores the gentle warmth that spreads inside of him when his child refers to the cottage in Skye that way. The elf bows sarcastically and pops away. Weasley shaking his head in disbelief.

“He shouldn’t be able to do that,” Weasley mutters. Severus tries not to stiffen at the words, but he sees Lupin’s hackles go up. He thinks the Goblin King notices.

“Let us go, Anzar Weasley,” the Goblin King says, holding out his arm to Harrison. “Anzar Ward, take my arm.”

Severus hangs back, finding Lupin drawn to his side as they watch their son take the arm of the King of the Goblins. If Harrison is feeling turbulent after the revelations of Black’s stipulations, he isn’t showing it. He stands stiffly, jaw taut, and Severus knows he is employing his particular brand of occlumency to manage his emotions. Severus is a confusing combination of concerned and proud. Weasley nods and presses his axe handle against a notch in the stone. A passageway grinds open.

“Lead us to the Black vault,” King Ragnok announces and Weasley nods, lighting his wand and pressing forward into the dark. Severus and Lupin exchange a glance and follow after them. Severus hears Lupin draw in a sharp breath when the dark stone rumbles closed behind them. They both light their wands and fix their eyes on the back of Harrison’s head. Harrison has not been enamoured with darkness or tighter spaces since his abduction. The muscles in his neck and shoulders seem tense but he continues to walk forward, albeit a little stiffly.

“Do you see, Ward, how the mineral runs in the stone?” King Ragnok says, gesturing a shiny nail, glinting in the light of Weasley’s upheld wand. “There is here a mithril vein. Do you see the silver?”

The Goblin King sets his nail along the wall with a ringing, scratching sound.

“That’s what’s on your nails?” Harrison asks curiously.

“Indeed,” the Goblin King sounds pleased. “A rare mineral we do not even mine anymore. Too ancient. Too precious. And here, do you see the gold vein? Put your fingers upon it, Ward, trace it along -,”

Severus smiles to watch his son’s bandaged left hand drift to the wall, to see the tension in his shoulders drop slightly. The Goblin King goes on and Harrison asks a few questions. Severus does not know if King Ragnok is simply educating his young Ward or if he has noticed Harrison’s discomfort and is seeking to alleviate it, but Severus is thankful. He looks at Lupin. The wolf’s face is still set with the same inscrutable expression as it was when Lupin heard about Black’s gift.

“He left you a house,” Severus says flatly. Lupin’s eyes flick to him quickly, a flash of a blush on his cheeks, as if he has been caught out.

“He did.” Lupin’s tone is neutral but his jaw is stiff. A sure sign of clenched teeth, one of Lupin’s tell-tale indicators of frustration.

“You are displeased,” Severus says, with quiet surprise, for surely he is good enough at reading Lupin to see this for what it is. Lupin’s eyes close for a moment and Severus sees him swallow down whatever overwhelming emotion is bubbling up inside him. When he opens his eyes again, they are dull with resignation.

“I despise poverty,” Lupin says factually.

Severus’ stomach clenches. It is not what he expected but when he hears it on the wolf’s lips, he sees the truth of it unfurling like one of Harrison’s absurd films behind his eyes. Black, always wealthy, always tortured. Lupin, always poor, only getting poorer with age. He is reminded suddenly of the dusty tins of beans Eileen would hide under the sink, of the pained, despairing expression she wore when she took them from Mrs Evans over the garden gate. Charity is a oddly dehumanising thing sometimes, but there is an animal inside that demands to be fed, whatever the cost to one’s dignity. *Or housed*, Severus realises, in Lupin’s case.

“As do I,” Severus says. Lupin gives him a knowing glance and nods, saying nothing. Severus remembers suddenly, that one of the reasons he was first drawn to Lupin at eleven years old (apart from him being the only other first-year there on those long, lonely nights in the Hogwarts Library) was because of the state of his shoes. Worn down leather, a little too big. Second hand. When facing the shiny, perfectly fitting squeaky leather shoes of Potter, Black and the other Slytherins on a daily basis, Lupin’s shoes reassured him. Someone else was poor. He never considered that for Lupin, perhaps Severus did precisely the same thing.

“Here we are,” the Goblin King announces. Severus looks up ahead. Weasley is lighting the sconces around a large, ornate door. Severus recognises the coat of arms upon it. It is not the Black family crest, but the crest of the Black Prince of Cornwall. Harrison is looking at it as if he can’t quite place it and Severus wonders, again, why his son seems unusually familiar with all things to do with the ancient Dark Lord. “Just press your diamond against the door, Ward.”

“Okay,” Harrison says nervously. Severus feels his eyes flicker to him, his left hand twitching.

“Allow me,” Severus says, stepping forward and gently unwrapping the bandage from his son’s hand, speaking softly. “It shall be alright, uncovered for a short time. I can rewrap it when we return.”

Harrison nods, flexing the trembling hand. The third finger still looks ragged but the wound is at least closed and looks a little less pink today, less indication of infection. The finger with the Black diamond bursting out of the skin looks ferocious as usual. Severus notices the pure rage etched into the Goblin King’s face as he looks at Harrison’s mutilated hand. Harrison notices too.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters quietly. “I lost.”

“Ward,” the Goblin King’s voice is like a whipcrack. “You are an *Anzar* in training. You are not yet obliged to win every duel. You did not lose. You will face your enemy once more and be avenged. Understand me?”

Severus partly hopes that the boy will declare he does not, since Severus and Lupin have both exchanged different violent hopes they have for Bellatrix's end at anyone's wand but their child's. Of course, Harrison does not do that.

"*Kun, Uzbudma*," Harrison whispers. Severus stares. He knows, of course, that Harrison has been learning the language of the goblins for the last six months but he has never heard Harrison utter a word of it. Lupin's wand arm actually drops in astonishment.

"Harry," he exclaims. "Well done! That - that was excellent pronunciation!"

"How would you know?" Severus mutters at the wolf. "You speak not a word of it."

"He is not incorrect," King Ragnok smirks. "*Ya harmu*, Ward."

"It's literally the only thing I can pronounce," Harrison mutters. "Professor Flitwick says that saying 'yes, my King,' is the only thing an *Anzar* needs to be able to say perfectly."

King Ragnok roars with laughter.

"Flitwick is completely right," Weasley says, winking at Harrison. "Come and just touch the diamond here, Ward."

The child obeys. The doors swing open. They troop in, following Weasley who mutters spells that spreads fire into the sconces in the stone walls. Severus is not surprised that it is the most lavish-looking vault he has ever seen. The black stone walls are smooth except for carvings of coats of arms, moulded beautiful and glittering like they are wet. It is likely full of more antiquities and treasures than Severus can ever hope to see, but he is distracted by the thing sitting right in front of them, in a clear space of shining black tile. A shimmering white cube of magic. A black, twisting cloud of shadow inside it.

"The obscurus," Harrison whispers, stopping dead in his tracks. "That's Sirius' obscurus?"

"It is," King Ragnok nods. "Ward must decide what to do with it."

"How did it survive?" Severus asks, moving closer, following Harrison's steps and watching the child carefully. His eyes are fixed on the swirling ball of traumatic, chaos magic with a unsettling eagerness in his eyes. Lupin stays back. Behind him, Severus can hear Weasley asking quietly: "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lupin coughs. Severus looks at him out of the corner of his eye. He looks even paler than usual under his scars. "*How* did it survive?"

"Dumbledore theorised it was possible," Weasley says.

"A theory only," Severus sneers. "It should have consumed him in order to survive, when it did not, it was at least drawing from his life energy, so now what is it possibly drawing from?"

"From me. From the bond," Harrison says quietly. They all stare at him. Severus sees Harrison's fingers on his right hand twitch in a very specific pattern. A thinking pattern. A scheming pattern.

"You are not going in there," Severus says sharply.

"It's like the cage," Harrison swallows but doesn't pull his eyes away from the obscurus.

The cage that Harrison was held in. *Fuck.*

“We can destroy it -,” the Goblin King begins.

“No,” Harrison snarls, glaring around at the King before fixing peridot angry eyes on Severus. “Let me go in.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I know what to do.”

“I do not care.”

“He’s trapped!” Harrison yells, gesturing angrily to the glowing cage. “Like I was!”

“*It is not trapped, it is being contained,*” Severus says slowly. “It is no longer connected to a wixen. It is nothing more than chaotic magical energy born of trauma. It does not feel its own incarceration.”

“You don’t know that!” Harrison snaps. “I’m going in and you can’t stop me.”

“I can and I will,” Severus says flatly. He subconsciously tightens the tether around Harrison’s wrist. Harrison scowls at him darkly, brows furrowing together. Severus feels a sudden brush of heat, of Harrison’s building magic and Severus plucks three very troubling words from Harrison’s mind: *Are you sure?* Severus looks at Harrison for a long moment and holds tightly to the tether, using it’s grounding to slide quickly into Harrison’s mind and use legilimency to pull up a memory of their conversation from last night. *All we are trying to do is keep you alive.* Harrison flinches, grimaces and then nods tautly. Severus tries not to show his relief. He honestly does not know anymore if he could restrain the child if he needed to. He does not know if anyone could. It is a chilling thought.

“I want to free it,” Harrison says tautly.

“You cannot let it out,” Severus says. “It is too destructive.”

“I didn’t say I would let it out,” Harrison snaps irritably.

Well, Merlin knows what that means. Severus knows whatever it is, he does not want anyone but he or Lupin to witness it. His child’s unique abilities is one of the hardest secrets he is tasked with guarding. He spins around to the others.

“I think we could benefit from some privacy, your Majesty.”

“I do not think that is wise,” the Goblin King leans on his staff. His eyes are fixed on Harrison with a blend of intense curiosity and expectation.

“Must I beg?” Severus snaps, with gritted teeth. Whilst Severus looks at the Goblin King, Lupin, Severus notices, has his eyes fixed upon Harrison. Always one set of eyes on the nightmare child.

“It would do you no good,” Weasley says quietly from where he is leaning against the door. “His Majesty wishes to see what Ward will do with the obscurus.”

Severus only hears the first words: *His Majesty wishes to see*. He looks between the Goblin King and his *Anzar* slowly. He sees that there was a plan made, perhaps before the will was even announced. Severus cannot help it, his wand slips into his palm as it always does when he feels as if he has been caught in something unexpected.

“I see,” Severus says quietly. “You mean to test my Heir, your Majesty? You mean to play games?”

“Ward is mine to protect also, Mr Snape,” King Ragnok chuckles but Severus hears no humour in it. “He is a Ward of the Silver Halls as well as an *Anzar* in training. There are things I must know.”

“And you?” Severus demands, meeting Weasley’s eye with quiet fury. *You are supposed to be on Harrison’s side*.

“I serve at his Majesty’s pleasure,” Weasley says evenly. “Besides, these are also things I must know.”

“I do not see why.”

“Because if, stars above forbid it, but if anything should happen to you or to Remus, Harry needs to be able to trust me,” Weasley says quietly. “It will be easier if he trusts me already and since I have been named as one of his guardians -,”

“In a will written by a false father!” Severus hisses, unable to restrain himself.

“In a legal document that, if anything should happen, is the only thing dictating his protection,” Weasley says patiently. “Harry will trust me better if he knows I can keep his secrets.”

“The more people who know, the more people can tell,” Lupin growls, his eyes never leaving Harrison. “As his current, living parents that is a risk we are not willing to take.”

“It doesn’t matter, Moony.”

Harrison’s voice compels them all to turn. He is lifting his hand towards the shimmering cage.

“Harry, no, don’t touch it!” Lupin lurches forward but the boy does, because of course he does. Snape expects him to be thrown back from it but he is not, he is sucked through.

“Shit,” Severus curses, running forward with Lupin to glare at his son on the other side of the glowing cage. He wants to berate the child but he can’t, because Harrison is looking around the cage and the *Obscurus* is there. His child is trapped with an *Obscurus*.

“Can you open it?” Lupin demands.

“Not without releasing the obscurus,” Weasley shakes his head.

“Come out,” Severus demands, but Harrison shakes his head.

“I’m going to help it.” Harrison says quietly. “I owe it that much.”

“It is the remnant of a man who betrayed you in so many ways, betrayed your godfather, betrayed your life and your wellbeing, who loved you more for a man who died sixteen years ago than

yourself!” Severus cannot stop the words falling from his lips, even as Lupin stiffens in pain beside you. “Even today, he has hurt you! You owe him *nothing!*”

“I know,” Harrison’s voice is flat. He looks at the obscurus. “But this is a part of him that was made before all that. This is the part that made all that happen.”

The child is right, of course, obscurus’ are formed in childhood and even if Black’s grew with him for an exceptionally long time it was likely born from the abuse of an innocent, but Severus cannot find adequate empathy to weigh against his worry for his own child, standing far too close to something that could consume him.

“Harry, I know you wish it had been different,” Lupin says gently and Severus is absurdly grateful, suddenly, for the man’s unreasonable levels of compassion. “If Sirius hadn’t had this then maybe he would have been ... more capable of the kind of love you deserved, but he did love you enough to always want to protect you. He wouldn’t want you to put yourself in danger this way.”

“I’m not in danger,” Harrison stares at Severus steadily, and Severus sees a steady glow beginning to emit from his skin. *The Black Magic.*

“You don’t decide that,” Severus snaps. *Stop it, you ridiculous whirlwind child.*

“Please, Harry,” Lupin steps closer. “Just ... come out. There are other ways to grieve.”

“You don’t get it,” Harrison shakes his head and Severus hears the unsaid words that would follow it: *you weren’t abused.*

“Tell me,” Severus demands.

Harrison looks up at him reluctantly. Severus stares into his eyes, waiting for the words to form. He doesn’t expect a memory. *Harrison, maybe seven years old, sobbing in his cupboard, the darkness around him so complete that for a moment, Severus doesn’t understand. Then he does. It’s magic.* He jerks back out of his child’s mind and sees the words scrawled behind those peridot eyes. *We know how it feels.* Severus swallows heavily. The child is right. Severus has his own memories of being so full of despair, so suffocated, that he could have had the pain ripped out of him and formed by magic into a traumatic ball of energy. Perhaps Harrison was only saved from such a fate by his Mage power, Severus only by the Prince magic.

“Please,” Harrison whispers, holding Severus’ gaze. “Let me help it.”

“Harrison.” Severus does not have all the words for what he needs to say. *Doing this will not make what happened to you better. Doing this will not not heal your dead godfather. None of this is redemption for irredeemable things.* So he says the only thing that is really prescient, the thing that the child needs to be reminded of. There are still secrets to be kept here. *“Negahbane raaz.”*

Harrison nods tautly and Severus feels a sharp foreboding spreading through his chest.

“I know. It’s okay. They won’t be able to say anything.” Harrison’s face is set with a very familiar terrifying expression. It is the face of Harrison before he breaks some kind of magical law. *Well, shit.* Harrison looks at them all. “Will you?”

Severus erects his mental shields and, without thinking, seizes Lupin’s hand, hoping against hope that the wolf’s own mental shields and the combination of the Prince shadows will protect his mind

from whatever rippling compulsion blows off his son in sudden waves. Voice magic, in it's full force. Dark as liquorice, trying to stick to Severus' memory, trying to silence his voice, but falling away. He hears Lupin gasp beside him. *Our child is a natural with the Dark Arts*. Then Severus remembers that Harrison would reject the notion of any art being 'Dark' and feels a thrill of pride and fear. *What is he becoming?*

"Oh Ward," King Ragnok's voice is not amused at all. His eyes are full of revelations, cold and calculating. Beside him, Weasley watches Harrison like a hawk and Severus wonders what kind of *Anzar* response is expected when a secret Mage compels the Goblin King without his consent. "Aren't you interesting?"

Harrison shrugs carelessly as his eyes cloud over with inky blackness, all traces of green vanished. His rune marks begin to flicker, as if lit behind the skin and the Black diamond shines with a piercing white light.

"*Shit*," Lupin curses softly, squeezing Severus' hand firmly. It's a testament to Severus' worry that he does not even consider pulling away. Feeling horribly helpless, he simply watches his child.

"We'll see how interesting I can be," Harrison says quietly, turning to face the obscurus.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Obscurus

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Child abuse/depression)

An extra chapter today because I could not make these three chapters into two. My inability to keep things short has worked in your favour.

This time, Harry grieves in a different way.

Next time, Bill Weasley has words. A lot of them.

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

Obscurus

Harry doesn't care that he's done some sort of strange voice magic on the King of the Goblins. Harry doesn't care that the tether around his wrist is so tight that his hand is actually pulled away from his body as Severus tries to tug him back through the cage. Harry doesn't care that his skin is prickly with magic and the corner of his vision is darkened by shadows and inside them, he sees the flick of the Grim's tail, the tendrils of Death's hair. He does not care because, for the first time since Sirius died, he can feel a familiar, desperate tug in his stomach. It can only be one thing. *The parabatai bond*. Which to Harry, means only one thing.

"Sirius," Harry whispers.

"Harry, it's not Sirius," Remus calls. "It's just part of his magic, a residual trace, made of trauma -,"

"Do not touch it," Severus commands. "Obscurus' consume the wixen that create them, it will consume you."

Harry doesn't listen to either of them. He thinks of himself, five years old in his cupboard, all of his hair cut off and nicks on his scalp from the razor, all because he had grown his hair back purple. Sirius was like this, Harry knows it. This is how the obscurus was made. He reaches up his left hand, full of the Black magic, chilling the air around him. He feels the flicker of great wings at his back. *Magic has been wronged*. Harry doesn't think there could be anything more wrong than this.

"Show yourself," Harry whispers.

White cloud whispers out of the black ring, he feels it flowing through his blood and settles around the Obscurus like a silver mist and suddenly, it's taking form, it's spreading out, settling like dust, covering the floor and filling the cage. Harry closes his eyes briefly and when he opens them, he's

in a shadowed version of Sirius' bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Vaguely, like shapes moving underwater, he can see the others outside of the cage and can hear their muffled voices, but he doesn't care. In front of him, sitting on the floor, shuddering and shaking, is a little boy.

"Hello," Harry whispers, crouching down on the floor. The shadowed boy looks up at him. Harry recognises those familiar black eyes, glittering like hard diamonds. He recognises that proud lip and strong nose, even though they are very far away from the chiselled features he knew. "Hello, Sirius. I'm Harry."

"It hurts," the child croons, rocking backwards and forwards.

"What hurts?" Harry asks, reaching out to touch the shadowed boy. Harry barely notices that his hand is full of white light. As he touches the boy's shoulder, he feels a warm shirt and a shaking frame. Beyond the cage, he thinks he can hear someone yelling but he doesn't care. "You can tell me."

"Don't know you," the boy's face darkens. Harry sees shadows catching his features and sees the swirl of the obscurus inside his eyes. "Don't trust you."

"That's okay," Harry says softly. He sits down on the floor, crossing his legs. The shadows furl up around him. "I know what it's like."

"Yeah?" The boy sniffs and looks at him curiously. The shadows unravel from his damp eyes.

"When I was your age, someone used to hurt me," Harry says. He moves his hand from the boy's shoulder, down to his hand. "They hated who I was."

Wherever Harry touches, it's like the child becomes more real, but when his hand moves away, the shadows return. The child sniffs.

"She tells me I have to stop but I don't know how to stop." The boy weeps shadowy tears. "Then she beats me and when she beats me, it makes the magic worse. I try to be like her, I try to learn my lessons and control it but ... it's too hard. It hurts."

"I know," Harry squeezes the boy's hand. "Me too. They used to hurt me when I did magic so I tried to keep it inside too. It hurt to do that."

"Hurts," little Sirius rocks. "Hurts, hurts, hurts -,"

"It's okay," Harry strokes the boy's hand. At his shoulder, he feels a presence that he knows no one else will see. A familiar, cold, long-fingered hand on his shoulder. He breathes out slowly, his breath misting on the air.

"Can we help him?" Harry asks Death. He thinks he sees Padfoot's shape outlined in the shadows on the floor.

"He is part of ours," Death's voice whispers in his ear. "I have longed for him for many of these mortal years. He has a place waiting with the other parts of himself."

"What should I do?" Harry can see less and less of what is beyond the cube. He knows, somehow, that he is not quite ready for whatever they are doing. Inside his head, he hears Sahara's voice: *do not be afraid of what you are made of, Greenheart.*

“He must be willing , ” Death says. Harry turns his attention to the shadowed boy rocking in front of him.

“Sirius, can I take you away?” Harry whispered. “Somewhere she can’t hurt you? Where you won’t hurt anymore?”

“Yes,” Sirius pleads. “Yes, yes, please, please.”

Death’s hand on his shoulder is icy but her voice is soft.

“Let the child of pain touch his ring,” Death whispers. Harry nods and looks down at the Black diamond. It is pulsating light, sustaining whatever magic is needed to encourage the obscurus into this form. Harry realises it is pulsing with his own heartbeat, which he hears heavy and pounding in his ears. “You do not have long, Master. You are not yourself yet.”

“I thought I have always will have been myself,” Harry mutters, his breath sparkling with icicles.

“In this realm, you are constrained,” Death’s voice sounds amused. “For now.”

“Sirius,” Harry stretches out his left hand towards the little shadow boy. “Touch my diamond.”

“It’s like father’s,” Sirius’ eyes widen. Harry sees the shadows swirling inside them. *A woman with a pinched face bends a naked child over a chair whilst he weeps. She raises a wand and lashes it down. Red welts appear across his the child’s back.* Harry gasps and looks away, unable to stop himself from lifting his right hand, which feels as heavy as a rock, to press it against Sirius’ cheek. The skin is soft but damp with tears.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harry chokes on the words. “None of it.”

“I couldn’t control the magic,” Sirius whimpers. “I tried, I did, I keep trying, I’m a bad son, I’m a bad heir, I’m *defective* -,”

Terrible boy. Insolent brat. Freak.

“No,” Harry’s tears freeze like gemstones on his cheeks. He strokes the child’s soft hair and kisses his frozen lips on the little boy’s tear-stained cheek. “No, Sirius, you’re not. You’re just ... you. I ...”

The words catch in his throat, words which he wishes his godfather had been able to say to him. It might be too late for them in the future, but it’s not too late for him now.

“Soon it will never be too late for you, Master,” Death whispers. Harry doesn’t know what that means but it’s vaguely encouraging. He strokes Sirius’ bare neck, the place where the Azkaban numbers will one day be.

“I love you just as you are. Always.” Harry whispers. The little boy’s eyes widen. Nearby, the Grim whimpers, pressing cold fur against Harry’s back.

“Begin, Master,” Death says. Harry remembers what Sirius said behind the veil. *Loving you ... it was worth every fucking second.* Harry knows what he meant.

“Touch the diamond,” Harry says. He takes the little boy’s hand in his own. “You’ll be safe, I promise.”

“You swear?” The boy whispers. He is becoming more real all over, Harry is starting to see the red blood through the back of his shirt. In contrast, the world outside the cage is becoming less real. Harry thinks he can even see the trees outside of Sirius’ window becoming less shadowy, moving in the breeze.

“Now,” Death sets her hand at the back of Harry’s neck. “Before you are constrained by his realm too.”

“I swear on my diamond,” Harry whispers. “On our house. The House of Black. Go.”

Sirius’ eyes, so full of memories of hurt and blood, widen but the child obeys. When Sirius’ fingers touch the diamond, white light engulfs him and Harry sees them. He sees them all. The wounded child, the warrior teenager, the tortured prisoner and the haunted godfather all in one moment. *Sirius*. They all smile at him and Harry hears their voice: *I knew I was meant to protect you, Harry*. Harry feels tears slip down his cheeks and nods tightly. Suddenly, all of Sirius is wrapped in white wings and Harry hears the song of the House of Black roaring a chime in his ears as the Grim appears, strong and wild and full of darkness and light, strengthened by the chaos of the obscurus, finally able to use it for something since it is contained inside Death’s grip: *to protect me*. Harry stares into the Grim’s glittering, familiar eyes knowing now that it is of Sirius but not Sirius anymore. Deathly and powerful and beyond the child and man who gave it spirit. Harry knows it will march with Death and stalk his footsteps, knows deep down that someday they will fight together, but it is not the same as having Padfoot. It’s the Grim now, truly. Weirdly, Sirius feels more dead than ever.

“Bye, Padfoot,” Harry whispers.

The great hound of Death vanishes. Harry knows it’s over. Sirius is gone, the last part of him finally free to follow into the next world and chase James across the land beyond, and Harry feels an aching unbearable loneliness. Oddly, it’s the memory of Severus’ voice that is in his head: *People die. We mourn. They are still dead*. Harry’s lungs are cold, so very cold, and he feels himself falling forward. For a moment, he is caught in soft arms, a neutral but pleased voice whispering in his ear:

“He is safe with me now. A stronger Grim I could not ask for in my service. I thank you for my gift.” Death’s long fingers slide through Harry’s hair. “Until next time, Master.”

“Bye,” Harry mumbles, and feels the cold stone against his face and chest, hearing the distant, satisfied caw of the Black raven in his ears. *Justice, honoured Mage*. Then, quite abruptly, there is light and sound again, voices rushing over him like water and a very familiar set of hands jerking him up from the ground. “I’m fine.”

“You are freezing,” Severus growls above him. Harry winces in the light and tries to breathe in the warm air, feeling it settle in his lungs.

“Warming up,” Harry mutters. “Don’t panic.”

“I would panic less if you did not insist on doing unpredictable things!” Severus hisses.

“What did you see?” Harry mumbles.

“Sirius,” Remus whispers and Harry feels his hand in his hair. When he can’t see Remus, it’s like it was in the deep place, Harry senses the thread of his magic, pine-scented, spiralling through his

blood down through his fingers into Harry's hair. Silver. *Looks like moonlight*, Harry thinks, dazedly. "You ... you made his obscurus take its form, you ... you freed it -,"

"Or killed it," Harry hears Bill mutter.

"He's a Necromancer," Harry hears the Goblin King growl nearby.

"He is fifteen," Remus says heatedly.

"Sixteen in a few weeks," Harry puts in drowsily.

"Be quiet," Harry closes his eyes as Severus pulls him up, leaning Harry's back against his chest and placing two fingers at his throat. "You have done more than enough."

"Doesn't the bracelet tell you that?" Harry mumbles.

"With you, it does not hurt to check," Severus snarls back.

"He cannot be a Necromancer," Remus continues over the top of their conversation. "He is too young."

"Since British law declares Necromancer's are born not made, it is irrelevant, and a Wixen can clearly kill things at any age," the King snaps. "Ward is against the law."

"Against British law," Severus drawls, wrapping a tight arm across Harry's chest. Harry's a little bit surprised by this since it almost seems oddly affectionate then he realises. Severus is preparing to apparate with him if needed. Harry sighs to himself. *Here we fucking go again*. "Other cultures are not so unenlightened as to outlaw a person based on their natural abilities."

"Do not play a culture war with me, Mr Snape!" The King thunders. "We are in the British Isles and here, Necromancy is illegal for a reason, unless you are here to be an apologist for the 'natural abilities' of Mordred the Fell?"

"What did I do?" Harry asks plaintively because he honestly doesn't know.

"You ... well, I don't think we know what you did," Remus says frankly, his voice hard. "Which is why I am surprised by His Majesty's reaction."

"I know exactly what Ward did," King Ragnok says flatly. "So does *Anzar* Weasley."

"I just set him free," Harry says, opening his eyes. The shining cage is gone and Bill, Remus and King Ragnok are staring down at him and Severus. "That's all."

"That's not all, Ward," Bill says quietly, his arms folded. "You forced an obscurus to take form after its creator was dead. That's channelling spirits of the dead. Now the Obscurus is gone. The only way to be rid of an obscurus is to contain it indefinitely or ..."

"Send it to the land beyond," King Ragnok glares at Severus for some reason. "Wixen have only two ways of doing such things deliberately: killing curses or the execution portal in your Department of Mysteries."

"Yeah, that doesn't go to the land beyond," Harry shakes his head wearily, feeling a bit sick. He's used too much energy and he knows it. Severus pinches him and Harry hisses at him angrily.

“Don’t pinch me, you shit.”

“Language,” Severus snaps and Harry realises, awkwardly, that Severus has a hand on his right hand and can understand every word he hisses, but then he decides to take advantage.

“Did you see her? Death?” Harry hisses. Severus’ eyes widen but he shakes his head slowly. Harry thinks he looks more concerned than before. An insidious thought slips into his mind. *Maybe he thinks I’m crazy.*

“What do you mean about the portal, Ward?” King Ragnok fixes his sharp, intense eyes upon Harry, eyes full of questions. For the first time ever, Harry feels pressure to answer the King that he serves. *Being an Anzar might be even more complicated than I thought.*

“I ... sort of went through it,” Harry mumbles. “But I came right back and I didn’t know.”

“Beware those who bring the Moirai,” King Ragnok growls and Harry feels Severus stiffen, the tethers between them as taut as a bowstring. Harry knows he is two seconds away from apparating them away.

“Yeah, not super keen on prophecies over here, your Majesty,” Harry winces.

“That’s an understatement,” Remus mutters. Severus says nothing, but his grip on Harry is like a hippogriff’s talons.

“A Wixen does not return from Charon’s gate and send obscurus’ onto the afterlife with a single touch without consequence,” King Ragnok snaps. “Who does those things, *Anzar* Weasley?”

“A Necromancer does,” Bill supplies, frowning heavily. “I’ve seen it before, in Egypt.”

“Where Necromancy is legal because other nations do not carry this ridiculous British prejudice!” Severus snaps.

“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,” King Ragnok snaps back.

“Always a fucking prophecy,” Harry mumbles.

“Didn’t I tell you to be quiet?” Severus growls, squeezing his shoulder.

“But I haven’t done anything!” Harry exclaims. He tries to struggle out of Severus’ grip but it does nothing. “Look, I didn’t even know it was a fucking portal, I just went through, and shouldn’t there be some kind of sign on that sort of thing?”

“The point is you came back,” Bill says softly. “You shouldn’t have been able to.”

“Well excuse me for not fucking dying!” Harry yells. “Excuse me for seeing something that was in pain after being bloody abused and tortured and thinking that maybe killing it wasn’t the best fucking idea!”

“But you did kill it,” King Ragnok gestures to the floor. All around them is a cloud of fine, black dust, like charcoal powder. “You touched the damned child -,”

“Sirius,” Harry growls at him. “It was *Sirius* and he was in pain!”

“His Majesty is not being derogatory,” Bill says quietly. “*A’lâju Nadan* is the *khuzdul* word for what a child is before they become an obscurus entirely. Child of shame or damned child.”

“He is not shameful!” Harry yells. He feels tears pricking in his eyes. He’s tired and cold and none of this is fair and Sirius is still dead.

“No, he was not,” King Ragnok says quietly, his dark eyes alight with flame. “The shame of the *A’lâju Nadan* is not to the child. It is shame to those who did not save them.”

King Ragnok’s eyes settle on Severus then on Remus in turn, and he looks absolutely furious with them both. Yet when he speaks, his gruff voice is as soft as velvet.

“How often will Wixen let their children suffer for their magic, hmm?” He raises his eyebrows at both of them. “How long will the *A’lâju Nadan* and those like them,” for some reason his eyes flick down to Harry, “go without saviours?”

Remus growls, actually properly growls and stands between the Goblin King and Severus and Harry. Severus is pulling Harry weakly to his feet.

“We did not know what we know now, and we are doing what we can,” Remus’ voice is a low rumble. “Cast aspersions where you must, Your Majesty, but we are the ones at your mercy. You are the one with the chance to enact a saving grace here, not us.”

“What?” Harry demands, staring between King Ragnok and Remus, who seem to have locked eyes and are having some kind of silent, deadly staring contest.

“His Majesty must decide if he will obey the letter of the law,” Bill says tightly, his gaze also fixed on his King and his friend. “According to the Fell Accord, Necromancers cannot bear titles of Noble Houses and ...,” Bill hesitates. “Any Necromancy must be reported to the Minister for Magic directly.”

“Who is Lucius fucking Malfoy! This isn’t fair!” Harry struggles against Severus again but the man must be hiding arms of steel under all that black fabric because it’s fruitless and Harry slumps, finally whining weakly. “Why am I in trouble? All I did was save him.”

Because nobody else fucking did, he thinks bitterly.

“You’re not in trouble for what you did, but you will be grounded in your bedroom until Rome for touching that cage when I told you not to,” Severus’ voice is surprisingly soft in his ear and Harry finds it weirdly calming to think of being grounded in Skye. His little bedroom, Kreacher and his treacle tarts, Sahara in the garden. “Breathe, Harrison.”

Harry does, shuddering in a breath as Remus and the Goblin King continue to stare at one another. He is vaguely aware that Severus is rubbing small circles between his shoulder blades and finds it odd that he doesn’t find it annoying, and even odder that it feels familiar. Then he’s accosted by a soft memory: *Waking, screaming, bleeding, coughing, vomiting. Severus, sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing his back in soft circles, giving him potions. Breathe, Harrison.* Harry doesn’t know whether to be weirded out by the fact that Severus has probably done this for him many times before or that it’s actually very comforting.

“A head start, perhaps?” Bill mutters quietly in the Goblin King’s ear. “Ward could leave the country, serve with me and the other *Anzars* abroad -,”

“But Hogwarts -,” Harry stammers.

“There are other schools, other teachers,” King Ragnok rasps, looking at Severus with utter dislike. “As Mr Snape has so frequently pointed out, there are other nations in which Necromancers flourish.”

“And so many of them will be happy to accommodate the Boy-Who-Lived, will they?” Remus asks, derision in every word. “You don’t anticipate that they shall throw us from their borders when they find out who follows us?”

“If you want me to break the law for you, Ambassador, I suggest you become less picky about how it is done!” King Ragnok growls.

“Wait, no, I can’t, I promised I’d go back to Hogwarts,” Harry says desperately, thinking of Dumbledore and their deal. *If I don’t go back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore will cut Severus loose.* He twists his head as much as he can to look at Severus, catching a glimpse of a stern, solid jaw. “The deal!”

“It is of no importance at this exact moment,” Severus says quietly.

“But he’ll -,”

“It is of no importance,” Severus snaps, cutting him off, dark eyes finding Harry’s, “compared to ensuring you are not turned over to Lucius a second time.”

And more importantly, Bellatrix, those dark eyes seem to say.

“But this is bloody insane!” Harry exclaims, turning around to glare at them all. “I’m not a Necromancer! I’m just - just a bit ...” he struggles for words. “Hurricane-y!”

“You did what you did, Ward,” King Ragnok sighs heavily, rubbing his golden cuffed ears. “Now we must deal with it.”

“But - but what did I do?” Harry demands desperately. “Really? I mean, what does a person have to do to be a Necromancer and be, like, in trouble for it?”

Loopholes, Harry thinks desperately.

“According to the Fell Accord, a Wixen who is suspected of Necromancy must be tried and found guilty of using unnatural powers to cause death, reawaken the dead or communicate with the dead,” Remus says automatically as if he doesn’t want to speak but his knowledge is spitting things out of his lips without his permission.

“I didn’t do those things!” Harry explodes. “Like, I didn’t kill it, it was never meant to be there! You said he wasn’t even really alive, and he wasn’t Sirius either, not, like, how he was properly, behind the veil!”

Remus’ head whips around at that. Severus tenses and Harry winces, knowing that he’ll have to explain that later and it will, probably, be fucking awful. He charges ahead. *Loopholes. Find the fucking loopholes.*

“There’s nothing that says just because I crossed the veil I’m a Necromancer, right?” he demands desperately. “It could just be a fluke, right?”

King Ragnok shakes his head, chuckling softly. He points a long finger at Harry’s throat, at the rune mark that is bright against his skin.

“You are a child marked by fate, Ward,” his voice is taut but Harry sees a hopeful flicker of amusement in his eyes. “You are, indeed, more than you seem.”

“Yet he does not meet the requirements,” Bill says quietly. “Due to the legislation Minister Fudge passed, Obscuruses are not technically considered Creatures or alive. Ward cannot have killed it.”

“You are wily, *Anzar* Weasley, and you do your family credit, but let us not pretend it would be anything more than a technicality,” King Ragnok bears his teeth briefly. “The Fell Accord is not a piece of lawmaking I take lightly.”

Harry sways slightly in Severus’ arms. He thinks of Dumbledore’s words on the night he rejected the Sorting Hat. *As proficient warriors as the Goblin Nation are, they are not prepared or even willing to mount a defence against Lord Voldemort on Harry’s behalf.*

“Please, if I don’t go back to Hogwarts, I’m going to have to run and if I run ... people are going to die.” Harry closes his eyes and thinks of the Black Prince’s words behind the veil. *There will be a reckoning.* Harry knows, just like he knows the scent of magic, that running will only delay the promised reckoning. Harry’s been running from Voldemort long enough to know that delays mean deaths. *Mum. James. Cedric. Sirius.* “So please, just ... help me.”

“Are you asking me as your King?” King Ragnok says softly. Harry looks at Bill and sees Bill incline his head minutely, giving enough guidance for Harry to latch onto.

“I ... I am,” Harry tries to stand up a little straighter, tries to think of what Theo might say to this monarch with weapons literally on his ears. “I know I’m your Ward and I could hide in the Silver Hall but I *can’t* hide from this fight, not ... not anymore,” Harry swallows heavily. He will not think of Cedric. Not now. “If you give me to Malfoy, he’ll give me to Voldemort and he ...”

“He will what?” the Goblin King says softly. Harry can’t finish his sentence. *He’ll keep me, Harry thinks bleakly. He’ll make me his. He’ll make a weapon out of me and change me until I’m nothing like myself.*

“He has broken no law,” Severus says softly, his arms a warm but firm cage.

“Yet,” King Ragnok looks at Harry seriously, his face suddenly shrewd. “If I help you, you must not break this law, Ward. If you do, I cannot save you from the consequences.”

“So what, no killing?” Harry stares at King Ragnok. “Not being rude, but like, are you kidding?”

“No one expects you to kill anyone, Harry,” Remus says calmly.

“No, only you don’t,” Harry corrects sharply. Sometimes, Remus’ unstoppable insistence that Harry is not in fact a murderer is very annoying.

“Killing is something that comes naturally to you, is it, Ward?” The Goblin King grins, sharp teeth flashing. “Got a count, have you? Let’s hear it?”

Severus groans lightly as if he knows that Harry will answer, which he does.

“One possessed defence professor, one Riddle-wraith, one basilisk, one giant spider and, depending on who you talk to, Voldemort when I was a baby,” Harry counts off his fingers. He notices King Ragnok’s face is becoming more interested whilst Bill’s frown is deepening. “And, one Death Eater three weeks ago..”

“Can you please refrain from confessing to murder in front of others?” Severus hisses in his ear and Harry blushes deeply but glares at the Goblin King.

“I can’t promise to not kill things,” Harry says stubbornly. “I’ll be dead in three months.”

“Excellent, for you would be a poor *Anzar* indeed if you did,” King Ragnok chuckles darkly. “No, Ward, you are not required not to kill -,”

“Though the ease at what you do so is a little worrying,” Bill mutters under his breath. Harry raises his eyebrows. He expects that kind of thing from Remus but maybe being suddenly named as his guardian is making Bill wary.

“- you may utilise your weapons at any point, what you may not do is use your Necromancy to end a life,” King Ragnok says firmly. Harry stares at him waiting for more of an explanation, but it does not come. He realises, suddenly, that they must all think he knows what he’s doing. That he’s in control of whatever the fuck is happening when really, he’s just listening to Death and the Black Magic. Harry huffs in frustration and then twists his head to look at Severus who is being oddly quiet. He lets words form behind his eyes: *I don’t know what the fuck that means*.

“Language,” Severus mutters, holding Harry even tighter as he nods to the Goblin King. “Harrison understands.”

“I do?” Harry mumbles.

“Be silent,” Severus hisses, looking back at King Ragnok. “Do we have an agreement? Harrison shall adhere to your terms and not use his Necromancy to end a life -,”

“*Use Necromancy? I can barely use my hands,*” Harry hisses. Severus winces but carries on.

“- and you shall not turn him over to the Minister,” Severus’ eyes flicker down to the dust on the floor. “Or reveal what has happened to Black’s Obscurus.”

“The last part you can be assured of. Ward saw to that,” King Ragnok gives Harry a calculating look and then turns to Bill. “He needs to learn better control of that, *Anzar* Weasley. Voice Magic compulsions are not a dark art to be dabbled in lightly.”

“Agreed, Your Majesty,” Bill says quietly.

“*I did a Dark art?*” Harry hisses, but Severus only pinches him. Harry flinches and glares. “*That’s abusive, you know.*”

“Of course you only use that word in the context in your life where it has no application,” Severus mutters then looks at the Goblin King with a glare. “It is hardly fair to accuse the child of Dark Magic when he simply lost control.”

“Like any magic is actually dark anyway,” Harry mutters, thinking of what the Black magic had wanted. *Justice*. “It just sings differently.”

“Silence,” Severus hisses. The Goblin King smiles at him sharply.

“Sings, does it?” he smirks slowly. “*Beneath the mountain, music woke*. Do you recognise that, Ward?”

“Um, yeah,” Harry frowns, remembering his lessons with Professor Flitwick and the long book of ancient goblin poetry Theo read to him at bed time. “It’s from the Song of Durin. It’s about the beginning of the world.”

“It is,” King Ragnok’s eyes gleam. “Songs, Ward. *For ancient king and elvish lord, there many a gleaming golden hoard they shaped and wrought, and light they caught to hide in gems on hilt of sword.*”

“His Majesty speaks of how conduits were first made,” Bill says quietly.

“Yeah, I remember, the poem about the mountain,” Harry stares at King Ragnok and then down at his Black ring. “Ancient goblins used songs to catch magic and put it in rings and stuff?”

Severus and Remus are oddly quiet. Harry wonders if this is news to them. But when Harry turns, he realises they are still, unmoving, eyes frozen and unaware. Harry panics, staring at Bill, unable to speak with fear.

“It’s alright,” Bill says softly, lifting his hands in a placating manner. “Within ancient goblin ground, when the monarch speaks the words of songs, Wixen who should not hear them are stilled. They are not hurting, they are just unaware.”

“Some things are only for goblin ears,” the goblin King says, looking hard at Harry. “Or for *Anzar* ears. There has not yet been an *Anzar* who hears the song of things. Perhaps you are the first.”

“I ... maybe,” Harry feels very uncomfortable knowing that Severus isn’t listening to this. “Can we wake them up?”

Bill looks at King Ragnok and receives a curt nod. King Ragnok spreads his hands wide and emits a low tone, like a long soft note of music that reminds Harry of the goblins who chanted around Sirius when he almost became his obscurus in number twelve. Then Harry feels Severus breathing against him again. *Thank fuck for that*.

“I leave them in your capable hands, *Anzar*,” King Ragnok says. He looks at Harry with a tilt of his head. “Thank you, Ward.”

“Huh?” Harry stares at the King in amazement. He was sure, absolutely sure, that all of this would somehow be the end of the Goblin King’s affection for him but King Ragnok merely snorts and rolls his eyes.

“You are a marvel, to be sure, one I imagine that the Wixen would hoard for themselves if they could, and yet you pledged your axe to my people and my crown,” King Ragnok says quietly. “We are glad to have you as an *Anzar*; trouble though you may be.”

“Thank you,” Harry swallows hard, disliking the way King Ragnok talks about him like he’s some kind of treasure. It’s too much like Tom. But he did make a promise and it’s not like Tom’s the only one who’s ever treated him like that. *Dumbledore, for starters*. “I know ... I know no one goes to war for me, but I will still go to war for you, if you, like, call me.”

“Who told you that?” King Ragnok gives him a sharp look. “That I would not go to war for you?”

“Albus,” Severus says shortly. “He described your lack of ability or willingness to mount a defence against the Dark Lord at Harrison’s behest.”

“He said that?” Remus mutters angrily.

“When Harrison was sorted,” Severus says. “Or not-sorted, as it became.”

Trust Severus to remember, Harry thinks. King Ragnok growls and strides closer, gripping Harry’s shoulder firmly.

“Too often, Wixen assume their own prejudices are ours,” King Ragnok’s eyes look like fires alight in dark, deep mines. “You are our *Anzar*, Ward. Perhaps I would not go to war for Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived, but my people guard our own. If the time should come, you will not bear your axe alone.”

Harry doesn’t know what to say to that. Somehow, he knows that the time coming is not a matter of if, but when.

“Thank you, my King.” He performs a short bow, mimicking the way the goblins did it in the Silver Hall. “May your enemies be thwarted and ... eaten by spiders.”

“May yours be blinded to the truth of you until you are strong enough to face them,” the Goblin King says softly, his eyes glittering strangely. “*Anzar* Weasley will prepare you the best that he knows how and he is the best of my *Anzar* s.”

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Bill says quietly and King Ragnok nods at him. He squeezes Harry’s shoulder leaning to whisper in his ear:

“You like Shakespeare, Ward?” Harry nods mutely. “Then know this. *There are more things in heaven and earth...*”

“Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” Harry breathes so quietly only the Goblin King can hear him. He nods solemnly.

“Wixen are limited in their philosophy, remember that,” the Goblin King murmurs, pressing a hand against Harry’s neck. It’s an odd gesture but Harry reckons it must be a Goblin thing. He sees Bill frowning behind him. “Keep your blades sharp and your weapons close, Ward.”

The Goblin King turns and leaves, Bill opening the door for him. As the door closes, a heavy silence fills the Black vault. Bill folds his arms and looks at them.

“A discussion is needed,” he says shortly. His blue eyes shine angrily as he glares at Remus and Severus. Oddly, it seems like it’s Remus who is getting the most glares. Harry’s too tired to fight about it.

“Of course,” Remus says, turning to Severus and Harry. “You head home, I’ll speak to Bill.”

“No. Both of you,” Bill says sharply, his gaze softening as he looks at Harry. “I need to speak with Ward also.”

“It can wait,” Severus snaps, holding Harry tight against him. It’s then that Harry realises Severus is bearing most of his weight. His legs are barely holding him up.

“It cannot,” Bill says simply. “I suggest we go to the Burrow.”

“Weasley, I said no,” Severus says.

“Did you see what his Majesty just did?” Bill points to the door that King Ragnok has just left through. “He covered his neck!”

“So?” Harry mumbles.

“I’m not aware of the significance,” Remus says and Harry thinks that’s truly the weirdest thing to happen today.

“Monarchs only do this to those they are personally willing to fight for, it is *Yom ra durumul gagin*,” Bill says emphatically. Remus gasps.

“Now you are aware?” Severus says drily.

“It means that the monarch will personally protect Harry’s throat, his life blood, and he will do it ‘there and back again’ which is the length of a quest or a battle,” Remus says, his voice speeding up as it always does when he’s remembered something from a book. “There hasn’t been a monarch who has sworn *Yom ra durumul gagin* in -,”

“Let me guess, a fucking long time,” Harry slurs, trying not to slump against Severus. “Whatever you decide, let’s do it now coz ... I’m gonna need to lie down.”

He feels long fingers press against his throat.

“Immediately,” Severus adds.

“The Burrow then,” Remus says, helping Severus carry Harry out of the Black vault. Bill leads them quickly to a spot in the tunnels with a strange rune on the wall which he presses his hand against so that it lights a small circle on the ground.

“A temporary apparition point,” Bill says.

“I can’t apparate,” Harry mumbles.

“Not knowingly,” Severus corrects him. “I shall side-along apparate you.”

Harry doesn’t have time to think this through - *can I apparate?* - before he feels like he’s being sucked through a metal tube that is way too tight and spat out onto grass. He stumbles but Severus’ arms are tight around him like a vice.

“You are well,” Severus says quietly but Harry’s not sure he believes him. He feels like every moment of power has been entirely leeched out of him from the obscurus and he can barely keep his eyes open.

What the fuck is wrong with me? He wonders. He's almost not surprised when Death's voice whispers in his ear.

You are not yet fully yourself. Your Mastery requires strength you do not yet have.

"Bill, I thought you were at the bank - Harry?" He hears Molly's voice and looks up. She's standing on the doorstep to the Burrow, wiping her hands on a tea towel with Percy standing beside her.

"We needed to drop in, Mum," Bill says, kissing his mother on the cheek. Harry's sees that she's lost weight and there are dark circles under her eyes. *Grief.* "That alright?"

"It's fine, Charlie's gone to work and Ron and Ginny are out the back," Molly looks between Remus and Severus. "Is something the matter?"

Harry can hear the fear in her voice. He recognises that. *Is someone else dead?*

"Nothing wrong," Harry mumbles, trying to reassure her. "Just ... bit woozy."

"First side along apparition is it, *Mr Snape?*" Percy says, before looking steadily at Harry with a hint of that same dislike. Severus stiffens. Harry winces, because of course Percy's had to have been told about Severus being his Sire since everyone else at the Burrow knows, but it really pisses him off. No one has ever called Harry a Snape. It feels very wrong and oddly disrespectful to Severus who only wears Tobias' name because he has secrets to keep. It would be like someone calling Harry a Dursley. *Now that's just fucking rude.*

"Lord Potter-Black, thanks, *Percival*, not that it's any of your fucking business what my name is," Harry slurs, swaying against Severus. Percy scowls darkly. "And *no*, it's not my first time, I just did a shit tonne of magic and I need ... to ..."

"Stop talking," Severus says quietly, but he shifts his weight so his arms tighten around Harry's chest, holding him upright. Harry sags a little inside his arms. It's very weird how quickly he feels safe in Severus' grasp. Percy looks absolutely stunned but Harry doesn't care. *Let him think I like being Severus' son, let him think we're some kind of absurd happy family instead of three people barely holding it together and keeping one another alive.*

"*Fuck you,*" Harry hisses, narrowing his eyes at Percy who is scoffing and rolling his eyes.

"Haven't outgrown the Heir of Slytherin rumours I see," Percy mutters.

"*Haven't outgrown being a pretentious cunt, I see.*"

"Stop hissing," Severus' voice is a whisper behind his head. Harry clamps his hand on Severus' and decides the image of Severus understanding parseltongue might be exactly what pisses Percy off most right now.

"*He's making fucking assumptions - we're not Snapes and I am the bloody Heir of Slytherin,*" Harry hisses and feels Severus pull in a sharp breath, "*and he's being a fucking dick.*"

"Language," Severus mutters but Harry thinks he hears amusement hidden in his voice as Percy steps back, eyes wide as he looks between them.

"Yes, enough, Harry," Remus says in a quiet but firm voice. "You wanted to talk, Bill?"

“Inside, if you don’t mind, Mum?” Bill says, gesturing to the kitchen.

“Not at all,” Mrs Weasley smiles at Harry. He hates that her smile is less bright than it was. “Percy, can you give us some privacy?”

“It’s my house too,” Percy scowls. Harry snorts and rolls his eyes slowly.

“*Being fired hasn’t made you less of a wanker,*” Harry hisses. Severus squeezes his shoulder in warning but says nothing, which Harry thinks is secretly very telling.

“No one is wanting to displace you, Percy,” Remus says lightly.

“Harrison needs to rest before we do anything else,” Severus says, his voice warm and dry above Harry. Just like when he was in the deep place, Harry sees Severus’ voice as well as hears it. Made of shadows, grey and a deep purple that smells like burnt sage and lavender and sounds like secrets. *Comforting*, Harry thinks, blinking. Percy just stares but Harry doesn’t care. Pretty soon, he thinks he will be too tired to care about anything.

“Harry,” Molly steps forward to press her hand to his forehead. It’s very nice and he closes his eyes, breathing in the scent of cotton and long grass. He’s missed her and until this moment, he hasn’t realised how much. Her presence is like a warmth he can’t deny, something that always makes him safe and soft. From within the firm cocoon of Severus’ arms, the pull of it is utterly irresistible. “I think you need a little sleep, love.”

“Yes, please,” Harry mumbles. *Safe. The Burrow. Severus. Remus. I’m safe.* “I’ll do that right now.”

He slumps against Severus and does precisely that.

-- -- --

Harry dreams.

Harry dreams or Sahara does, but again he sees them. Merlin, Morgana and Nimue, standing together.

“The Mage has chosen,” Nimue smiles. “Now we are three. Together, we shall bring justice.”

What would be justice, Harry? Tom’s voice echoes inside his head. There is pain, too. A lot of pain, aching and screaming and ripping through him and he feels it all again. The cupboard, the car door slammed into his elbow, the stairs against his back as he tumbles, the cold garden and the cold stars. Then when he thinks there cannot be more, that the endless rhythm of his painful days that is

at least predictable in its kicks and shoves and a starving belly, but then, horribly, there is more. There is worse. There is unimaginable pain in his scar as Quirrel turns to dust, there's basilisk and acromantula venom under his skin, and there's the crushing drowning of the Dementors drawing closer. Then Tom.

Then Vernon.

Then Umbridge.

Then Bellatrix.

What would be justice, Harry?

He doesn't know. There's fire and ice and shadow and lightning in his fingers and he could burn the whole world if he wanted to, there are wings on his back and diamonds in his eyes and he will die a million deaths consumed by the heat of the earth but at least it will be over.

The Obscurus Sirius looks at him with weeping eyes: *Please, please. Save me. Please.*

I couldn't save you, Harry screams at him, trying to gather the child into his arms as little Sirius bleeds to death and turns to fire under Tom's wand, just like the Slytherin ring did.

I don't know what justice is, Harry looks at Nimue's face. Sees the green leaves under her skin that remind him so much of Luna. *I don't know where to find it.*

You will be justice, a voice whispers in response. Maybe it's Oldest and Deepest, maybe it's Sahara, Harry can't quite tell. He's on the edge of sleeping and waking, longing for Theo's touch and smell.

"We will be justice," Harry hisses sleepily.

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Uzbadgabil

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation)

This time, Bill is still pretty fucking cool.
Next time, spilt ink.

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

“Harry,” a soft voice is calling his name. Its magic smells like cinnamon and Harry takes a deep breath. “It’s only a dream.”

My dreams are never just dreams, Harry thinks and groans as he rolls over and thinks the same thing he thinks every morning since Bellatrix. *Not the cage. Please, not the cage.* He takes a slow breath. When Harry opens his eyes, all he sees is orange. Definitely not the cage. He blinks. Now it’s more than orange, now it’s posters of orange things flying. He blinks again. Brooms zooming, Chudley Cannons posters. It can only mean one thing. Ron’s room. He’s lying in Ron’s bed. Sahara is wrapped around his neck, hissing quietly. Harry swallows hard and rolls his head to the side, surprised to see Bill Weasley sitting on Ron’s beanbag, slowly sharpening his axe. Harry watches, entranced.

“You should sharpen your axe once a week,” Bill says quietly. “When you regularly use it in combat, daily.”

“Huh.” Harry’s mouth tastes like cotton wool. He licks his dry lips.

“You speak parseltongue in your sleep,” Bill says. “Do you think in it?”

“Sometimes,” Harry says without thinking. Sahara’s face rests against his chin, her tongue flickering his mouth.

“You dreamt of justice,” Sahara hisses.

“I don’t know where to find it,” Harry hisses back sleepily. Bill watches.

“Your snake just appeared,” he says conversationally. “Did you summon her in your sleep?”

“Um, yeah, must have done,” Harry stammers. It’s easier than saying that drinking his blood has meant that Sahara is more in his head and able to travel to where he is easily, even without the Slytherin magic. Bill doesn’t look convinced but nods slowly, the whetstone grinding drily against the blade edge.

“George asked me to give this to you,” Bill says. He pauses and reaches into his pocket, drawing out something and placing it on the edge of the bed beside Harry. It’s his fang. It’s no longer just silver-tipped, it’s got something like dark blood in a smear across it. Harry touches it gingerly, feeling a strange trepidation when he remembers the last time he used it when the Slytherin magic had taken the majestic form of the basilisk and he plunged it into the odd crown that he thinks must have been Tom’s. He misses the Slytherin magic so fucking much. Sahara tries to lick it.

“*Does it still sing of death?*” He hisses at her.

“*Yes, it is of you.*” Sahara hisses back. That sounds uncomfortably like Death telling him he’s her Master, but Harry takes the fang feeling a strange tingle in his fingertips when he does.

“Thanks,” Harry rasps, sliding up the sleeve of his jumper, one of Remus’ again, and slips the fang into his holster. He’s been wearing it underneath his clothes every day just out of habit and it feels nice to slip it back into its place. Bill nods firmly.

“You have not been unarmed, not truly since you have a wand, but still, you should not remove it,” Bill says quietly. “Though I think perhaps you are never unarmed, Ward.”

“You mean my ring?” Harry leans back on his pillows and flexes his left hand. Severus has not yet re-bandaged it. The Prince ring has hidden away in the shadows. Bill might call Severus by his first name now but there are still secrets to keep. *Negahbane raaz.*

“I mean you,” Bill says frankly. He sets aside his axe and leans forward, his hands clasped between his knees. Harry looks at the rings and tattoos and thinks, with a pang, of Sirius. *I never asked him where all of his tattoos came from.* His grief over Sirius is sharp in a different way. *The same but not identical,* Harry thinks, remembering how Severus described grief to him in January. “I asked Remus and Severus if I could talk to you alone.”

“Okay,” Harry blinks slowly. “Go for it.”

“Who is the most powerful Wixen you’ve ever met, Ward?” Bill asks carefully.

“Um, I dunno,” Harry frowns. “I mean there’s Tom, Dumbledore, the Contessa ... I guess Severus and ...” Harry winces, but not wanting to say it won’t make it less true. *She took me apart.* “Bellatrix.”

Harry privately thinks that Narcissa easily makes that list but doesn’t dare speak her name in front of Bill. Especially after the sharp glitter in his eyes when Harry said Bellatrix’s name.

“Three of those individuals are what the goblins call *Uzbadgabil*,” Bill says quietly. “Do you know what those words mean?”

“Um, *uzbad* is king, right?” Harry scrunches up his face, trying to remember his khuzdul lessons with Professor Flitwick. “Is the other part ... good?”

“Close. It translates as Great Ruler. The goblins use it to refer to people who have the power to command fear and inspire followings,” Bill says, looking down at his fingers. “Voldemort, Albus and the Contessa are all *Uzbadgabil*, and Severus and Lestrage are two of the fiercest warriors in the United Kingdom.”

Harry can happily characterise Severus that way but he wouldn't call Bellatrix a warrior. *A traitor,* caws the Black magic inside him.

"Okay," Harry raises his eyebrows. "So?"

"You are surrounded by very powerful, very dangerous people," Bill says slowly. "Today you did something that has not been recorded in this country since the time of Mordred and you are only fifteen. You will be *Uzbadgabil*."

"People call me lots of shit," Harry mumbles, rubbing his scar. It's itching. It's always itching. "Is this to do with the Necromancer stuff? What's the problem with Mordred?"

"Do you know anything about Mordred the Fell?" Bill asks.

"No," Harry stares at him blankly. "Where would I have heard about him?"

In your dreams, Sahara speaks into his mind.

Doesn't count, Harry thinks back.

"Touche," Bill chuckles softly. "Mordred the Fell was the Dark Lord who stood against Uther Pendragon. He was known for being a Necromancer, for raising an army of the dead to fight against Merlin and Morgana and Nimue. He is the reason why the Fell Accord was made, between Goblins and Wixen. The goblins of Britain looked at Mordred's power, to resurrect the dead, to send souls to the beyond, and condemned it."

"And Wixen let them?"

"Ward, you have to understand what this country was like back then," Bill leans forward. "There were no muggles, not yet, there were just people with magic and people without it. Magic was everywhere and Wixen and Fae and goblins and centaurs and non-magical people, they all mingled together."

Harry remembers Merlin and Nimue and Morgana in his dream from a few nights ago. He remembers Merlin's dislike and fear of Uther.

"But Uther changed all that," Harry says slowly, trying to put words to what is still, in his mind, just like a film, Sahara's weird dream-memories unravelling.

"Magic is memory," Sahara hisses.

"If you made more sense, I might give you more mice to eat." Harry hisses back.

Bill looks at him curiously.

"He did," Bill says. "He was the first muggle King to hate and fear Wixen and creatures, he was led astray by Mordred the Fell. So when Mordred was defeated, the Goblin King forced the next Muggle King on the throne to sign the Fell Accords, or he swore he would begin an endless war against Muggle and Wixen alike."

“So the Goblin King got rid of Necromancers for good,” Harry mumbles. “Because one Necromancer was bad?”

“It was a terrible war,” Bill’s eyes take on a distant quality. “The Goblins in the United Kingdom call it ‘The Pride of Wixen.’ They cite it as the moment they knew that Wixen would always consider them other, rather than equal. For goblins in Britain, Necromancers represent the very worst of our kind. Everything they despise about us and everything they fear.”

That’s me, Harry thinks. Everything people despise and fear.

You lie to even yourself, Greenheart, Sahara whispers into his mind.

Harry swallows hard. He thinks of his dreams, or of Sahara’s dreams. He thinks of Merlin and Nimue and Morgana. *We will bring justice.* He strokes Sahara’s scales and speaks to her in the space inside his mind where her consciousness always dwells.

How can I be of the Mage and of the one the Mage fights against at the same time?

What is corrupted must be paid for, Greenheart.

I’m going to stop feeding you blood if you don’t start making sense.

“So now I’m fucking Harry of Mordred and Harry of Merlin.” Harry mutters, thinking of Luna.

“What was that?” Bill raises his eyebrows.

“Nothing,” Harry sighs and stares up at a poster of the Chudley Cannons keeper catching a quaffle. *Nice save,* Harry thinks absently. “So you think I’m a Necromancer too?”

“I don’t know,” Bill looks at him appraisingly. “I’ve met Necromancers in Egypt and it is a closely guarded craft of magic. Necromancers are raised, not born, no matter what His Majesty says. I have never heard of a Necromancer coming into the Art of their own accord, not without tutelage and guidance.” Bill looks at Harry’s hands significantly. “They also can rarely harness their Art without a conduit.”

Yeah, but they’re probably not secretly Mages.

“You mean a wand,” Harry says tiredly, flexing his fingers. “Don’t rings count? His Majesty said the goblins made the rings, long ago.”

“Goblins made all the magic rings, long ago,” Bill says with a curt smile. “Lordship rings are not traditionally thought to be conduits because they cannot harness all magics.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Harry says blankly, looking at his diamond which fizzles out white sparks. “The ring doesn’t harness the Black magic, the Black magic uses the ring to harness *me*. ”

Bill gives him a long look, his blue eyes just as steady but sharper than Arthur’s.

“That might be the most controversial thing you’ve said today, Ward, and that’s saying a lot,” Bill’s voice is quiet as it fixes on Harry’s Black diamond. “The traditional understanding of Lordship rings in Gringotts, where magical heirlooms are sometimes studied, is that they contain certain magics, not that they can act as channels for wider magic and a Wixen’s own skill. Though you seem to not be traditional in any way, Ward.”

“Yeah,” Harry snorts. “It annoys the hell out of Severus.”

“I can see how it could be frustrating and I've only been part of your guardianship for a few hours,” Bill smiles softly.

“Sorry about that,” Harry winces. “And the whole ... Voldemort’s got a killing curse waiting for you thing.”

“You didn’t say anything I didn’t know already,” Bill smiles tightly. “I am Lord Weasley, I am in the Order, I am a blood traitor and I am dangerous. I’ve been on his list since I took my *Anzar* vow.”

“Yeah, but, I said it about Tonks too and she’s your ... whatever,” Harry flushes. He’s not really sure what Bill and Tonks define themselves as, since he knows they’re not exclusive and he’s sure Wixen have proper words for that.

“Anchor Partner,” Bill says gently. “That’s my preferred term. Nott would likely be yours.”

“No, we’re not, I mean, we don’t have other people and anyway we’re not, like ... whatever,” Harry finishes lamely, blushing even brighter red. Bill Weasley is a very handsome and cool man who clearly has sex with lots of people and Harry suddenly feels very young and very stupid.

“Boyfriends?” Bill asks with a smile.

“Yeah, that,” Harry picks at the threads on the duvet cover, cheeks hot. “We’re ... different.”

We’re soul bonded, but I can’t tell you that.

“You certainly are,” Bill chuckles.

“And you think me being a Necromancer makes me ... *uzbadgabil* ?” Harry asks, trying to move the conversation away from him and Theo.

“I think that Necromancer or not, you will be *Uzbadgabil*,” Bill says, shuffling on the bean bag. “If you continue to display this level of power, people will follow you.”

“Yeah, Blaise mentioned that,” Harry gulps, thinking guiltily about the No Wands and Bear Wands treaties he has promised Blaise and Fred he will sign next week in Rome. He can feel the inner circle he’s accidentally created tightening (*Theo, Hermione, Ron, Blaise, Daphne, Fred, George, Neville*) just as his outer circle widens. Yet even as they approach Slytherins and Gryffindors alike, Harry feels the same nauseous curdling in his stomach when he thinks about followers. “I’m not really up for that if I’m honest.”

“I know. That’s why I wanted to speak to you privately,” Bill looks at him seriously and leans forward. “I will teach you how to be the best *Anzar* you can as His Majesty commands, but there’s something I need to ask you first.”

“Cool,” Harry sits up a bit straighter. This is what he needs, not more talking about trauma, he needs to be taught to fucking fight. “Go for it.”

“Do you remember when you asked me to take you away from Hogwarts after the Sorting?”

“Non-sorting,” Harry corrects. “Yeah, I do, why?”

“Because I want you to know that I still can take you away,” Bill says frankly. “You are under the care of the Silver Hall. I am still your *Anzar*.”

“I’m my own *Anzar*,” Harry mumbles.

“You are an *Anzar* in training,” Bill says with a small smile. “You told His Majesty that you couldn’t run from this fight, but if you really do not want to be *Uzbadgabil*, then I can take you away and ensure you never become it.”

"Where would I go?" Harry snorts. "I'll always be me. Voldemort will still always want me."

He tries not to flinch when he says that, because the words conjure up a pair of avid red eyes, trying to devour his face with their eagerness and spite.

"Goblin halls run deep into the earth," Bill's eyes have taken on a sharp gleam. They remind Harry of the spires of crystal in King Ragnok's crown. "Voldemort could look all he wanted, he would not find you."

"So I'd hide away?" Harry can't stop the disgust creeping into his voice. His hands grip the duvet in front of him tightly, the tiny snitches zooming under the fabric in his fingertips. For some reason, he can't stop thinking about how it felt to be underground in the cellar, sure that he would die beneath the earth. "I'd cower in some goblin safe place whilst people die? That's what you want me to do?"

"It is possibly what His Majesty would prefer since Goblins do prefer to keep their greatest weapons secret until the last moment," Bill says carefully, and Harry flinches at his choice of words, hearing Tom's voice: *little weapon*. "But it does not mean he will push you for it. He sees the nobility in you fighting your own battle and for the goblins, this is not yet their war and we better hope for all our sakes it does not become theirs. Goblin wars are bloody things."

"It's your war though, right?" Harry looks at Bill sharply. He's a man who's lost two uncles and a father to Voldemort. "You're in the Order, you were at the Ministry, you're fighting - ,"

"As the Head of Clan Weasley, His Majesty understands that I need to fight for the survival of my family," Bill says quietly. Oddly, Harry feels suddenly offended. *It's my fight too. It's my family too.*

"And you want me to run from that fight? Bellatrix *killed* people, Sirius and your - your Dad," Harry stumbles over the words. "I'm her Lord now, she's my responsibility -,"

"Ward, I'm going to be super clear about this," Bill leans forward, eyes like chips of ice. "When the time comes, the line of people wanting her death on their wands forms behind me."

Harry stares at him. He believes Bill, one hundred percent, and it's weirdly relieving. *Maybe justice for Bellatrix doesn't have to come from me.* Still, he swallows hard and looks down at his Black ring. *The Black Prince will ride.*

"You want me to run rather than face it all?" Harry whispers.

"I want you to know that I can get you out of this if you want," Bill says steadily. "But if you choose to stay, you will become something you might not be ready for."

Harry thinks about it for a moment. Hiding whilst other people die at Voldemort's wand. He won't play Dumbledore's games anymore, he won't be pushed into things, just like Severus said, but he's not going to let more people stand in front of killing curses for him. *Like Sirius did.*

"Thanks, Bill, but I have ..." Harry stumbles over the word 'family.' Him and Remus, Remus and Severus, Him and Hermione, it's a kind of a family but it feels weird, suddenly, to say it aloud. He has people to protect. *You cannot protect anyone from the viciousness inside you*, a slippery voice, one that sounds a little like Tom, creeps into his mind. Harry swallows it back. "...people too," he continues quietly. "People to stay for."

"I know," Bill looks at him with compassion in his eyes. "But it will be a war, a really nasty one and people make *Uzbadgabil* for that very purpose. To survive a war."

"A talisman," Harry whispers, thinking about his conversation with Severus when they were brewing. *Or a scapegoat*, he thinks bitterly.

"More than that," Bill says. " *Uzbadgabil* are saints, dictators, political masterminds, saviours and martyrs. Wixen make them and when they are chosen ... you won't be able to stop it happening, Ward."

Oddly, it's Hermione's voice in his head. *Are we still in this together?* He feels his stomach clench. Even now, even with Bill offering to give him an out from all of this, he still feels completely alone. *Why do I feel so fucking alone?*

I have seen your heart, Harry, and it is mine.

Harry turns his mind away from memories of Tom's voice which are more with him than Tom ever was when he was possessing him. Even if he's alone, he's not going to run from whatever might happen. Harry swallows and looks down at his hands, both still trembling lightly.

"Yeah, I know, because it's already started, hasn't it? *The Boy-who-Lived. The Chosen One. Uzbadgabil.* " Harry quirks his mouth into a smile.

"Just because you have been groomed for something doesn't mean you have to become it," Bill says sharply.

"Yeah, well, maybe I won't," Harry shrugs, closing his eyes. "We'll have to wait and see."

There's also the fact that I probably won't survive the year, Harry thinks tiredly. *Won't have to worry about followers when I'm snake food for Nagini.*

No snake shall ever eat you, Greenheart, Sahara whispers.

Except you.

Bill is looking at him curiously as if he's trying to read Harry's thoughts.

"Do you know what this means?" Bill extends his hand with the tattoo on it. Harry shakes his head. "It's the eye of Horus. It's a protection tune."

"It's really cool," Harry says, running his finger over the skin. He feels a tiny warmth tickling his fingertip when he touches the ink.

All *Anzars* have them on a part of their body that they need to survive.” Bill flexes his left hand. “On their axe bearing or knife bearing or bow bearing limb.”

“Not your wand arm?” Harry asks curiously. Bill shakes his head.

“Goblins do not carry wands,” Bill says.

“Oh yeah,” Harry looks down at his hands. He realises that whilst he has done a shit tonne of magic today, he has not activated his old wand from its holster all day. Bill sees him looking and smiles wryly.

“Another way you are less than traditional, Ward,” he says. “Perhaps you are more goblin than you thought.”

“I just ... I don’t like wands much,” Harry mumbles, pulling his sleeve down over his holster. “Not since ... the cage.”

There are certainly wands he can bear, Severus’ being the primary one, he doesn’t even notice when it is drawn or tapping him with a warming charm. Remus’ is another and Bill’s has seemed pretty friendly today, but he can’t look at them without thinking about Bellatrix, using the tip of her wand to open his skin.

“That’s partly why I want to give you a protection rune,” Bill says quietly and taps Harry’s left hand with a finger. “Here.”

“Okay,” Harry shrugs. “How?”

The only marks on his skin that didn’t come from scars are his runes and they were drawn on with blood. He thinks it’ll be a bit like his rune on his back. It’s ugly but at least it’s useful, and he expects Bill to be able to do something that is less ugly than his Franken-rune.

“It’s like tattooing,” Bill shrugs. “I use a needle and ritual rune ink, it will hurt a bit but -,”

“Cool,” Harry grins. He thinks of Theo telling him his favourite stories were about tattooed Norse warriors. Maybe Theo will like Harry with a tattoo. He certainly likes his runes. “Wicked. Let’s do it. Will it look the same?”

“We choose a rune or symbol that’s meaningful to you, that means protection,” Bill says. “Mine was done before I was sent out to Egypt so I chose the symbology of a relevant deity.”

Who protects you, Greenheart? Sahara whispers.

“Okay,” Harry thinks carefully and then reaches inside his t-shirt to pull out Theo’s rune necklace. “This one?”

“That’s ... the Norse rune for protection?” Bill says, looking at it closely. “I assume Nott gave it to you?”

“Uh-huh,” Harry nods, tugging the silver rune along its chain anxiously. “Is it okay to have two of the same around me?”

“It should be fine,” Bill says, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a small leather pouch. He withdraws a sharp needle and what looks like a hard lump of black blue tack. “It won’t take very

long and I'll glamour it afterwards so that -,"

The door creaks open. Harry and Bill look up. Severus is standing in the doorway, eyes thunderous.

"So I do not find out?" Severus drawls slowly, arms folded. Remus is behind him, looking thoroughly weary.

"It's for protection," Harry says as Bill holds the needle in his hand and rubs it against the hard ball of ink. "For my hand. My axe-bearing hand."

"You are fifteen!" Severus snarls. "It is a tattoo!"

"Oh, like you didn't have a tattoo underage?" Harry quips, staring pointedly at Severus' arm where the Dark Mark sits. *Hypocrite*.

"The circumstances were quite different," Severus says sharply.

"Yes, your tattoo only hurts you, at least Harry's will protect him," Remus says, equally sharp. Harry can tell, as he always can now when it's something his Sire and godfather have had a fight about. He's a bit surprised that it's this way around. If he had to bet, he would think Moony would be the one having fifty fits about it.

"Wait! I wanna see!"

"Me too!"

Two redheads poke out from behind Remus' back. Ron and Ginny.

"No, we are not drawing Molly's attention to this," Remus says sharply, blocking their way in but Ron ducks quickly under his arm.

"Harry's not getting his first-ever tattoo without me seeing it," Ron says stubbornly. "'Mione will kill me." "That's a genuine concern," Harry says, grinning at his oldest friend, jerking his head so that Ron jumps onto the bed beside him, pulling his long legs up to tangle with Harry's in the bundled duvet.

"Alright, mate?" Ron says gamely, prodding Harry's knee with his toe.

"Same old," Harry says lightly and Ron nods firmly, shifting a little bit closer to look at Harry's left hand.

"What design are you picking?"

"I want to see! You've never let me see you do any of yours!" Ginny demands, jumping up and down behind Remus, trying to get a good look. Severus, who has not moved from the door frame, rolls his eyes.

"No, Ginny," Bill doesn't look up from where he is pressing his wand tip against the shining needle. "Go downstairs. Luna's here."

"She is?" Harry asks Ron, who nods with a soft smile.

"I will go to the Fae," Sahara hisses, sliding out of the open window.

"Leave her ferret alone," Harry hisses back.

"It looks delicious."

"What's she doing?" Ron asks warily.

"Hopefully not eating Luna's ferret," Harry mutters.

"But you didn't let me in for Charlie's or Percy's or Fred's or George's!" Ginny moans.

Harry can't see her face from behind Remus but he sees a flick of angry, red hair. He looks at Ron in surprise.

"They all have tattoos?" he asks curiously. "Even Percy?"

"Weasley clan ritual," Ron shrugs. "I get mine when I'm seventeen. Younger siblings aren't supposed to see, so this is my first time watching Bill tattoo anyone."

"Mine too!" Ginny calls.

"Nope," Bill says.

"It's not fair!"

"Such is life," Bill says easily, in what Harry thinks is actually a pretty good impression of Severus, but before Ginny can rage, Remus has started to guide her down the stairs.

"Come on, Ginny, let's go and help your Mum peel the potatoes," Remus looks back over his shoulder at Severus. "I assume you're going to hover unnecessarily?"

"We have different definitions of necessity, wolf," Severus mutters, not taking his eyes off Bill's needle. He closes the door as Remus and Ginny walk down the stairs. Harry hears Ginny's voice floating back towards them.

"Do you have any tattoos, Moony?"

"Never you mind," Remus says and Harry smirks. Severus closes the door and leans against it, raising his eyebrows at Bill.

"The design?"

Harry pulls out his Theo necklace wordlessly.

"Absolutely not," Severus says.

"Why not?" Harry demands.

"Because it is a Norse rune," Severus drawls in a very condescending way, Harry thinks. "It was the Runic symbol of Medea Nott's family and she wore that necklace and that emblem prominently. You and Theodore risk enough by wearing one another's symbology, even hidden. You will not have it carved into your hand for every discerning Death Eater to notice."

"Well, what should I get then?" Harry snaps. "I want the rune."

"I would suggest nothing," Severus says glibly, "but since you are determined to blemish your skin forever, feel free to choose something utterly obnoxious. Perhaps a butterfly, or the name of your favourite music group."

Harry opens his mouth in amazement at this fucking bizarre moment of what seems to be traditional parenting. From a man who joined a cult, became a spy and seems to have slept with the parents of nearly every Slytherin Harry knows (*Oh Jesus, did Severus sleep with the Contessa?*) it seems like a bit too fucking much. So Harry just glares at him, remembering the last time Severus tried to pull any kind of parenting on him. Namely, the night he'd been abducted. *You're just the man who fucked my mother.* Severus scowls at him. Harry doesn't know if it's because he's seen the memory or he's just pissed off and finds he doesn't much care.

"Huh?" Ron stares between them dumbly as Harry and Severus glare at one another. "Music groups aren't symbols. Or runes."

"Muggles do it," Harry says tightly, glowering at Severus in irritation. "Though I don't see how an ugly *skull* with a snake is any less stupid than a pretty butterfly."

"Death Eater tattoos are not protection runes, they are serf brands," Severus snaps back, "and if the only thing that recommends your design is that is *prettier* but not less stupid than something thought up to bind Death Eaters to their Lord -,"

"Yeah? At least it's doing something good," Harry snorts. "Not burning into my fucking arm."

Harry expects a hissing rebuke about his language but it doesn't come. His eyes flash, if possible, even darker. Severus, it seems, is in no mood to play lightly. *Well, shit.*

"That would mean more if the good you were concerned with was not how endearing it shall be to a certain Norse son of war," Severus' eyes glitter angrily and Harry actually hates him for a second for being so right. "But since your primary reason for self-mutilation is the courting practices of Vikings -,"

"Fine!" Harry exclaims, feeling himself flush deeply red as Ron smirks beside him. He glares at his Sire, whose eyes are impassive. Harry suddenly wonders if it is the 'self-mutilation' part of the whole equation that is bothering him so much. Annoyingly, the cut on the palm of his hand begins to sting. He clenches it without thinking and Severus' eyes flicker to it, raising his eyebrows. "I'll choose something else. Happy?"

"Overjoyed," Severus drawls, "since apparently, it is too much to ask you to go more than forty-eight hours without doing yourself some bodily harm."

Harry has the urge to throw something at Severus and, at that moment, is filled with the immature desire to pick something that Severus will find very fucking annoying. He sees one of the red highlighter pens Hermione loaned Ron for his revision on Ron's bedside table and grabs it, quickly scribbling a series of dots and stars on the back of his left hand for Bill to follow.

"Do that," he demands. He glares at Severus, his Sire's words from earlier in the day echoing in his mind: *A remnant of a man who betrayed you in so many ways.* Harry is still mad at him for being so bloody right all the time.

"What's that?" Ron squints at the dots. Severus looks like he's swallowed a lemon.

"It looks like ... Canis Major, the constellation of the Dog star." Bill says, twisting his head around to look at it. "Good choice."

Harry tips his chin defiantly up at Severus. *Take that, you wanker.* "Utterly obnoxious enough for you?"

"Plenty," Severus says shortly, opening the door. Harry is certain, in his very bones, that he's leaving before he says something Harry can't forgive. Harry's oddly almost disappointed. He's grateful for Severus, sometimes he thinks he might even think his Sire is kind of okay, but then he pulls shit like this and Harry remembers that he's still a fucking dick.

"It won't fix the tremor completely, but it will mean that Harry can always carry a weapon, even if he can't grip other things with his left hand," Bill says abruptly, guiding Harry's hand to the edge of the bed and poising the ink drenched needle above it. Harry realises he's talking to Severus who has paused in the doorway. "It's not a perfect fix but he will not be defenceless again."

Severus doesn't look at Harry but his eyes flicker to Bill. Harry feels the invisible tether around his wrist tighten for a moment and then Severus nods firmly. Whatever Severus does or doesn't do, Harry knows this is something he cares about. *Whether or not I can survive.*

"Work clean and quick," Severus says in a low voice to Bill. "I must rewrap that hand soon."

Then Severus is gone, slamming the door behind him. Harry sighs and looks at Ron, who looks stunned. Harry doesn't care. Let Severus be mad. Harry's mad too. Harry's mad that Sirius is dead, truly dead, that the Grim will never be enough of him to satisfy Harry, that Severus doesn't understand why Harry still loves him and that Harry doesn't have any explanation for that. *You owe him nothing!* Harry knows Severus is right. It doesn't make it less painful. Right now, however, there is something painful he can do that might make things a bit better in the long run and if Harry's not allowed to cut himself to pieces with sea glass, then maybe this is a better option. *For now, anyway.*

"Okay," Harry rolls his shoulders and clicks his neck just as he does before Quidditch. "Let's get a tattoo."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

The Wisdom of Ronald Weasley

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation)

This time, Ron learns a secret.

Next time, Harry's in Rome. With Blaise.

My dearest friend has covid and has had to cancel her honeymoon. She is an avid reader, so I am doing daily updates until she tests negative (except Sunday for private reasons). Lucky for the rest of you! As soon as she's better, regular scheduling will resume.

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

"I don't know how you live with that, mate," Ron shakes his head, eyes wide, staring at the door where Severus has left.

"Better than the Dursleys," Harry snorts, wincing slightly as Bill sets the needle to his hand. He tries to ignore the curdling in his stomach, to stop his memories flashing to blades in a dark cellar. *I'm fine. This is different. This is totally fine.*

"Are you sure?" Ron asks sharply. "That it's better?"

"Yeah, I'm - ah!" Harry hisses loudly as Bill pushes the needle into the skin and white light bursts out of his hand.

"Harry?" Bill is asking but Harry has curled up into a ball and can't see him.

The sickly sweet scent of dying flowers. His mouth is sealed shut with a spell, held in place by stone and metal. When bone is cut, when a bone is sawed, it is the deepest, cruellest burn. How can bone hurt?

"It's okay," Ron is saying in a soothing voice, rubbing his hand up and down Harry's back but Harry can't feel it, because of the stone. There's stone all around him and he will die, buried alive in this cellar, with all of his bones cut out if she has her way. His skin is cold, it's chilling down with the Black magic but he does not care, because if he's cold, maybe it will all hurt less.

"Severus!" Bill calls. Harry hears the door open and somebody mutters under their breath before there is a weight on the bed on his other side, opposite Ron. Harry smells mint and sage and rosemary and smoke.

"Look at me," Severus commands. Harry looks up wearily. Severus' eyes are dark and they search Harry's as if checking for something. He sees a flicker of relief. Then Severus reaches for Harry's

left hand, still pulsing with white light, and pushes his hand through the light. Harry watches as Severus' face twitches with the pain of it but doesn't stop. *He's done this before for me when I have nightmares.* Severus holds his wrist softly. He holds Harry's right hand also, his thumb pressed against the invisible Prince ring. "Can you feel my touch?"

" Yes, " Harry hisses and the parseltongue slips from his ring to Severus' hand. Severus flinches slightly but keeps speaking.

"Does it feel as hers did?"

" No, " Harry shudders and closes his eyes. Severus' hands are warm and dry. Bellatrix's were clammy with blood, cold with her magic. They made him think of dead things. *That I'm dying too, that everything is slowly turning to liquid and I'll be nothing but juice in the earth.*

"Keep your eyes open." Harry does, pulling his eyes back up to Severus' obsidian ones. He thinks of the nothing place, of how it feels when it's just him and Severus and nothing else but them. Severus nods sternly. "You will cease the Black magic. Weasley will begin. You will keep your eyes on me. Ronald will speak to you of the here and now and you will concentrate upon it. Do you understand?"

Harry nods, taking a shuddering breath in. He sees a flash of something in Severus' black eyes and understands. This is why Severus was opposed to the rune protection, not for aesthetics or a type of parenting that Harry thinks he has no right to. Harry sighs and lets words crowd easily behind his eyes for Severus to pluck out. *You were worried this would happen.* Severus raises a slow eyebrow but nods. Of course. Harry feels a little less mad at him because it's hard to be mad at someone who is thinking about his welfare literally every second of the day. Harry's never had that before. It's a bit annoying, really, but also wildly comforting in a way he never expected. It's sort of like when he's at Hogwarts, and he's safe in the knowledge that there is always food he can eat in the castle. It's like a safety net, the fact that Severus is always watching, a background surety that at least his basic needs will be met. *Healing. Sleep. Food.* He wonders, briefly, if that is all there is really, to being a parent? Harry breathes out and draws the Black magic back inside. Severus glances at Ron. Harry doesn't dare take his eyes away from Severus'. Bill takes hold of Harry's left hand and Harry feels the scratch of the needle against his skin as if Bill is just testing it. Harry closes his eyes but Severus squeezes his right hand firmly.

"Eyes on me," Severus commands and Harry stares into obsidian black orbs. "Speak, Mr Weasley!"

"Yes! Right," Harry feels Ron jump beside him on the bed, his knees pressing against Harry's. "So, um, the Cannons are having a shit season -,"

Bill presses in the needle and Harry draws in a breath. *Cold. So fucking cold. My hand hurts, why does my hand hurt so much?*

"Where are you?" Severus demands quietly. He doesn't blink. Harry has never appreciated before how little Severus needs to blink. It's a bit weird, really, like some kind of black-eyed fish.

"Here," Harry whispers, glad that his voice has returned. Severus nods approvingly.

"Continue, Mr Weasley," Severus says. Harry stares into Severus' deep-sea creature eyes and thinks about merpeople.

"- but they're breaking in this new chaser and she is awesome, she's got this great dodging thing that I think is going to change everything -,"

By the time Ron has recounted all of the news about the Chudley Cannons, Bill is finished and Severus looks bored out of his fucking mind. Harry's sweating lightly but he's managed to stay in the right place and that's all that matters. He takes a shaking breath and stretches his trembling fingers. He doesn't want to look at the tattoo, not yet, and doesn't trust himself, so looks at Ron.

"Sounds like the Canons have sorted out their offence but what about the defence?" Harry asks.

"And that's my cue," Severus mutters, standing up and turning to Bill. "May I rewrap the hand now?"

"May I wrap it?" Severus asks Bill.

"Not yet," Bill says, wiping the needle on his jeans and glancing at Harry's pallor. "Ron, take Harry for a walk outside, let the magic settle. Fancy a brew, Severus?"

"Very well," Severus' voice is stilted and he watches Harry like a hawk as he gingerly climbs out of bed. He catches Harry's eye. "Twenty minutes, then we leave."

"Fine," Harry mutters, following Ron down the first flight of stairs and then, surprisingly, taking a diversion into Percy's room. "Um, why?"

"Percy will be downstairs," Ron says, opening the window and clambering out onto the small roof. "Reckoned that's not what you need right now."

Harry smiles and follows Ron over the windowsill to sit on the shallow incline of the roof of the kitchen, looking out over the meadow garden. Below them amongst the tall grass, Harry can see Ginny and Luna lying down, the sun in their hair, Luna's parasol over her head. They open their eyes and wave up and Harry waves back, grinning. Underneath them, the kitchen window is open. Harry hears Remus' voice drifting up:

"Is he okay?" Remus asks.

"Well enough," Severus' voice returns.

"I suppose Potter has always been fragile," Percy sniffs, in a voice that Harry recognises from his collection of "trying to impress other adults" voices.

"If you can define fragility as surviving torture, mutilation and possession by a Dark Lord, then I suppose you might be correct," Severus says sharply. Ron, who is listening too, nudges him and grins.

"Harry goes by Potter-Black, Percy, we told you this," Mrs Weasley's tone is also much less indulgent than it has been in the past.

"But he's not a Black," Percy says. "Not a natural one, anyway. He's ... well. You know."

"Oh shit," Ron breathes, eyes dancing with amusement. Harry shares a knowing glance with him. After all, both of them can imagine the kind of look on Severus' face right now.

“He is Lord Black,” Remus snaps. “Percy, these secrets are very important, they are dangerous to all of us, but especially to Harry. We hoped we could trust you with them but I think a vow might be in order.”

“Go Remus,” Ron whispers gleefully. Harry rolls his eyes. He knows Remus is bluffing, but he enjoys the sound of Percy spluttering.

“Mum!” He whines.

“This family has already lost too much,” Mrs Weasley’s voice is firm but thin. “I will not risk losing a child as well as a husband.”

“He’s not even -,”

“Do not finish that sentence!” Mrs Weasley snaps, in a tone that Harry has only ever heard used on Fred and George. From the look on Ron’s face, he’s as shocked as Harry is.

“I think that’s enough, Percy,” Bill says quietly. “Mum, shall I put the kettle on?”

“Yes, love, thank you,” Mrs Weasley sniffs. Harry’s heart constricts at the idea that she is shedding tears over him. Ron’s hand squeezes his knee. He hears the sound of the window closing below them and then the voices are muffled.

“He’s such a dick,” Ron whispers, shaking his head.

“Yeah.” Harry swallows hard. He doesn’t like the idea that he’s a wedge between Mrs Weasley and one of her sons. *I’m not worth that.*

“It’s not your fault. Percy’s just ... well, I reckon he’s jealous.”

“Jealous?” Harry almost yelps the word. “Of me?”

Ron nods solemnly, picking a piece of moss off the roof tiles.

“We’re alike, sometimes, me and Percy,” he says quietly. “Or we used to be. Do you remember when I saw myself in the bloody mirror? All old and wise and shit?”

“Yeah.” Harry tries not to remember the family on James’ side that he had seen. It’s too painful a reminder of what his mind can invent when it is really desperate.

“Percy’s like that. He always wanted to be first. To be best. To be ... well, chosen,” Ron looks at Harry uncomfortably. “Y’know, how I was with the whole ... goblet thing.”

“I remember,” Harry looks down at his new tattoo, at the slight pinking of the skin around the ink. “You’re not like that now.”

“More important things to worry about,” Ron shrugs.

“Yeah.” *Like keeping me alive,* Harry thinks bleakly.

“How does it feel?” Ron asks, reaching out to touch Harry’s wrist.

"Tingly," Harry says, stretching his trembling fist. The inky dark stars on the back of his hand are joined by faint lines, Sirius, the dogstar, the most prominent of all. The flesh feels tender and itchy, sort of like his scar first thing in the morning.

"Wanna test it?" Ron asks, pulling a broomstick paring knife out of his pocket. "Bill said it had to be a weapon."

Harry takes a deep breath and takes the knife in his trembling left hand. The magic inside his tattoo shifts and suddenly, there's strength in his fingers that wasn't there before. He grips it tightly with a gasp.

"Wow," Ron says.

"Yeah," Harry swallows. He looks down at the Sirius star, right below his stump of a third finger. *I was always meant to protect you, Harry.* "Wow."

Harry hands the knife back to Ron wordlessly, letting the silence stretch between them. Below, he can hear Luna and Ginny talking softly about tattoos.

"I can't wait until I'm seventeen and I get my clan mark," Ginny sighs, "and then I'm gonna get fun ones, y'know, like the muggles do."

"Like a butterfly?" Luna comments dreamily. "My mother's Patronus was a butterfly."

"That's really nice," Ginny says quietly. "Your Patronus is a hare."

"Yes, you could have my Patronus tattooed on you if you like, Ginny," Luna says, twirling her parasol. Harry spots Sahara wrapped around her arm. "On your shoulder, you have very pretty shoulders."

"Thanks, Lu," Ginny grins. Ron smiles happily down at them both. Harry sees how Luna's been good for them. *She brings light wherever she goes.*

"So," Ron says, looking at Harry's hand. "Sirius is dead."

It's sort of a relief to hear the words from Ron's lips. It doesn't hurt like it would from other people. This is Ron. Ron knows.

"Yeah," Harry nods slowly. The sun is in his eyes and he squints. "So is your Dad."

"Yeah," Ron shakes his head. His brown eyes are full of a bleakness that wasn't there before. "Fucking weird, right?"

"Right?" Harry nods vehemently. "So fucking weird."

Weird is the word for it, Harry realises. It's unreal, it's unfair, it fucking sucks but it is just plain *odd* that Sirius isn't out there somewhere in the world, pissing him off in some way. It's weird that Harry won't hug Sirius again, it's weird that Arthur won't talk to him about rubber ducks ever again or exclaim over matches.

"I just keep thinking," Ron's adam's apple bobs heavily, "that it's just so weird that Dad won't hear about my OWLS. Or know Percy came back and is being a predictable dick again. Or see the twins'

joke shop and pretend not to laugh. Or that Sirius won't be a pain in the arse whilst looking like the coolest motherfucker on the planet."

"Yeah," Harry says quietly. "That's really weird."

This is the thing about Ron. There are some things that Ron just gets. Harry's angry, Harry's sad, Harry has so much pain inside that he thinks he might bleed to death with it, but most of all the world does feel exceptionally off-kilter since Sirius and Arthur died. As if they are all walking around forgetting something vitally important. As if there has been a glitch in reality and they've all switched universes but only Harry remembers the time before. It's very lonely but right now, next to Ron, it feels less so. Harry feels something against his knee and looks down. A white ferret looks up at him expectantly and Harry smirks.

"Sorry, no apples," Harry strokes its back and raises his voice to call down to Luna. "What's her name today?"

"Medea."

"Of course," Harry mutters, shaking his head at Luna's usual brand of insightfulness.

"How was the pyre?" Luna asks. Harry isn't surprised she knows. Thinking about Apollonius' pyre is strange - as if it happened a lifetime ago. *Wow, today has been a really long day.*

"Fine, Luna," he says.

Luna lifts her parasol for a moment and Harry sees those bright blue eyes, assessing him. He knows what's coming. "Hello, Harry of Merlin and -,"

"Thanks, Luna," Harry winces, not quite in the mood to hear he's 'of Mordred' right now. "I know who I am today."

Ron looks at him sharply, quizzically for a moment but then his frown smooths away. Harry sees the effort it takes not to question. He wonders how many times in the last year Ron has done this for him, silently brushing aside his own queries and concerns in favour of just being this for Harry. Being the one to whom Harry doesn't have to offer explanations. It's a big deal. Harry strokes the ferret's pink nose as it curls up in his lap. Sahara's voice speaks into his mind.

There is no shame in your truth, Greenheart.

According to you, and you eat lizards.

They are delicious.

"I have something to tell you," Harry blurts out. Ron raises a red eyebrow.

"Did you and Nott have sex?" Ron asks frankly.

"Jesus!" Harry flushes brightly. "No!"

"Thought not," Ron says glibly. "Kreacher would cut off his dick and bake it into a pie."

"That is fucking gross, *never* say that again," Harry winces, shaking his head in disgust whilst Ron smirks. "No, I have something else to tell you."

"Okay."

Here goes nothing.

"Do you ..." Harry hesitates, "do you and Luna talk about stuff?"

"All the time," Ron grins down at Luna, who has rolled onto her stomach. The parasol is hiding her and Ginny's head and her legs in their pink flowery trousers kick up in the air. "Why?"

"Do you ..." Harry takes a breath. The ferret's nose is a little damp against his palm. It's weirdly comforting. "I mean, I know you guys are like, hanging out and stuff, and that's totally cool, I'm not implying it's, like, anything different from just hanging out ..."

Shut up, Harry, he thinks fiercely, knowing how annoyed Hermione will be if he spooks Ron. Still, he presses on.

"...but, like, if you were ... *more* than just hanging out, not in like a boyfriend/girlfriend way or - or an anchor partner way -," (Harry is suddenly very glad Bill taught him that expression) "- maybe in the way that Charlie sometimes has a ... a special person he hangs out with? Then if you were doing *that* together, maybe more than friends but not - not like what Theo and I do -," Harry winces. "Then she might have told you ... do you know? About her? What she ... really is?"

Harry stops rambling. Ron looks at Harry steadily and then nods carefully.

"Yeah. We ... we're like Charlie and his ... people. When he has people." Ron's voice is barely above a whisper. Harry is privately rejoicing but studiously lets his expression show none of it. This is the closest Ron has come to admitting that he and Luna are in a relationship. They've never said the words between the three of them, but Hermione's read every book on asexuality she can find and Harry's forbidden her from mentioning any of them to Ron until he mentions it to them. Harry's just glad that Ron has Charlie to look up to and speak to about all this and that Luna is there for Ron in the way that he needs, especially now that Arthur is gone.

"That's ... great," Harry says. Ron nods.

"She told me what she is. I mean, not in so many words, but yeah," Ron says, dropping his voice so it will not carry down off the roof. Harry nods, barely trusting himself to speak. Luckily, Ron is Ron. "Are you gonna tell me what you are now?"

Harry nods, swallowing hard. *Negahbane raaz*. He has to make sure he does this the right way.

"Did you ever read stories of ... Of Merlin and Morgana and -?"

"Nimue, yeah," Ron frowns. "Nimue was a fae, like Luna, Morgana was Wixen and Merlin was -,"

"Yes," Harry says abruptly. Ron's eyes widen and his mouth falls open.

"Is that what you are?" Ron whispers.

"Who the fuck knows," Harry snorts with laughter, shaking his head bitterly. "I mean, yeah, but now people are saying other stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like I might be ... a Necromancer."

"A Necromancer?" Ron hisses, eyes wide. "Like Mordred and the Three Brothers and Rasputin?"

"I only know one of those things but yes," Harry sighs, rubbing his scar.

"Who's saying that?" Ron demands.

"Dumbledore," Harry winces. "There's this weird prophecy thing about Persephone and because I crossed the veil he thinks -,"

"Of course he does," Ron rolls his eyes derisively. "Fucking loves prophecies, that one."

"And then there's Blaise and Blaise's Mum, but I think they're secretly kind of into it?"

"They would be," Ron snorts. "Some people think his Mum's a Necromancer anyway."

Makes sense, Harry thinks, remembering his promise to the Contessa not to run from power.

"Then there's King Ragnok," Harry says. "He's not into it. Like seriously not into it. He's really mad."

"Why?"

"Because I ... did a thing, I dunno," Harry groans. "Basically, if I'm a Necromancer I'm against Goblin law. And Wixen Law. In the UK, anyway."

"Does he know you're a ...?" Ron struggles for the word. "*Merlin* ? Does Dumbledore know?"

"No," Harry shakes his head. "That's a secret."

"Who knows that?"

"Theo. Hermione. You. Snape and Remus," Harry feels weird calling Severus by his first name around Ron, especially given how badly Theo took it this morning. "Luna and Kreacher. Magnus and ... one other person."

It seems supremely unwise to mention Narcissa.

"Okay," Ron frowns. "Are these the same people who know about you being ... well, Heir of Slytherin and the rings stuff?"

"No, not quite, Fred and George know about some of that," Harry says. *That I'm the Heir of Slytherin particularly.*

"And about Snape being your ...?"

"Your family knows that, and Theo and Hermione. And the Goblin King. And Dumbledore. And Magnus."

And Narcissa.

"Wait a minute," Ron scrunches his face up in concentration. "This is mental, so Bill and the Goblin King and Dumbledore all know that you're not really a Potter but they *don't* know that

you're a Mage?"

"Yeah."

And only Severus, Remus, Theo and Narcissa know about the Princes.

And only Severus and Remus know about the glass on the beach.

And only Severus knows about meeting Death.

"Are there more secrets?" Ron asks shrewdly.

"Yeah," Harry doesn't want to lie so he looks down at his battered trainers trying to think of something comforting to say. "But Kreacher knows everything. If I kept things from him he'd eat my bloody eyebrows."

"Kreacher knows?" Ron stares at him. "Not Nott?"

Harry thinks of the beach in Skye, of the glass in his hand. Of Death beyond the veil. Of the way he dreams of Tom, thinks of Tom, hears Tom's voice and Tom's offer over and over again. *Come with me and be remade.*

"No," Harry shakes his head. *Some secrets are for keeping people safe.*

"Fucking Merlin, Harry," Ron stares up at the clouds in disbelief. "How do you keep it all straight?"

"I'm good at secrets," Harry says quietly. *Negahbane raaz. Guard the secrets.* Harry never thought it could be genetic.

"Yeah but this is next level," Ron shakes his head. "Mate. This is ... some heavy shit."

"Yeah."

"Like You-Know-Who's stealing the philosopher's stone level of shit," Ron says. "Like my rat's a fucking murderer level of shit."

"Yeah," Harry snorts. "You are not wrong."

"People really think you're a Necromancer?" Ron whispers. "Like, that you're really gonna be a Dark Lord?"

"Maybe," Harry shrugs and thinks of the look in the Goblin King's eyes and the resigned sadness on Dumbledore's face. *Maybe definitely.*

"Maybe they only think you're a Necromancer because they don't know you're a ... Merlin," Ron whispers. "No one knows shit about ... Merlins. Their powers could be anything."

"Magnus does. He's half of one."

"Woah," Ron's eyes boggle. "I thought he was just a super powerful Daemon."

"Everyone does. It's a secret."

“What did you do to make them think you’re a Necromancer?” Ron asks.

“I ... well, I guess I killed Sirius’ obscurus?” Harry rubs a hand against his stinging scar. “That’s totally not a normal thing to do, apparently.”

Ron looks at him for a long moment. Then he rubs Harry’s back gently.

“Mate,” his eyes are full of familiar compassion. “That must have sucked.”

Harry feels sudden tears in his eyes and blinks, looking up into the sun. He tries not to think about little Sirius, his tears and desperation.

“Yeah,” he chokes out. “It fucking did.”

Ron nods. He waits for a moment for Harry to gather himself.

“But even if you did do that, it doesn’t necessarily make you a Necromancer,” Ron whispers. “You could just be a ... a really weird one of what you are, right?”

Expect to be changed, Master. Harry shivers lightly when Death’s voice runs through him. Somehow, he doesn’t think being a Necromancer is the reason Death is so chatty with him. Maybe Ron’s right. Maybe there’s something weird about him being a Mage.

“I don’t know what I am,” Harry whispers, feeling very very tired.

Mage. Necromancer. Murderer. Freak.

Tom’s voice slips into his head: *We are fruit fallen from the same tree.*

You’re a bastard, Harry thinks back, fiercely.

And you’re mine, Tom chuckles back.

Harry pulls up the not-caring, drowning Tom out. *Sirius is dead. Don’t care. People think I’m a dangerous Necromancer Dark Lord. Don’t care.*

They are quiet for a second. The ferret sighs.

"I do."

"Huh?" Harry looks up at Ron.

"I know who you are," Ron repeats, looking at Harry fiercely for a second. "You're the boy who shares lunch."

"Huh?" Harry blinks at him.

"The train. First year," Ron says simply. "They can call you what they want, Harry, but you're still you. The lunch sharing, Remembrall catching, troll jumping boy."

"You're the one who knocked it out," Harry protests.

"Yeah, with a *spell*," Ron says emphatically, "you're the crazy, muggle-raised idiot who decided to use your wand as a fucking *stick* by shoving it up its nose."

"You can put that on my tombstone, Ron, thanks," Harry jokes. "Crazy, muggle-raised idiot."

"Nah," Ron grins. "It's gonna be 'ugh, troll bogies'. It's gotta be."

"Okay, I'm definitely not leaving you in charge of this, it's going to have to be Hermione," Harry laughs. "Since I'm not gonna live long enough to have any smart grown-up quotes just make sure she doesn't put something sappy."

Ron's smile fades. He looks out over the garden to the tall trees of the forest where Arthur is buried.

"Don't talk like that," Ron's voice is suddenly serious. "I don't want you to die."

For the first time ever, Harry feels a genuine pang of guilt. Usually, he just feels like people don't get it, that they don't get him if they think he's got a broomsticks chance in hell of surviving to turn seventeen, but not today. He just feels sorry for hurting Ron.

"Sorry," he mumbles, scuffing his shoes against the lead tiles. Ron nods and Harry knows he's forgiven.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ron asks quietly. "About the thing you did with the veil and ... all that?"

All that. The veil, Sirius, Bellatrix, Tom, Death, the piece of glass in his hand. Harry shakes his head.

"It's ... a lot. It's too much right now," he mutters. Ron nods and puts a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"You look like shit, mate," Ron says.

"Rude," Harry mutters.

"Are you sleeping?" Ron presses.

Harry shakes his head. Ron nods knowingly and squeezes his shoulder.

"You need Nott back," Ron says.

"He's better off where he is," Harry sighs. "Safer."

"I'm pretty sure Nott can decide that for himself," Ron says a little drily. "Knife-wielding bastard."

"Maybe," Harry stares at the clouds as they fly, dusty and light, against the blue sky. If he tells Theo everything, all the ways that he's changed, all the ways that he can't change back, will Theo still feel what he feels now? *What if the bond becomes a burden then, and he doesn't want to be tied to a suicidal insomniac nutcase anymore?*

"Look, Nott is a dick," Ron says gruffly. "I don't like him. He doesn't trust anyone except you and he's, like, possessive of you -,"

"That's because he's mine," Harry says automatically, because it's true, even if Ron doesn't know about the fidelity bond.

"Yeah, and you're mine and Hermione's!" Ron says hotly. "That doesn't mean less just because, y'know, we don't snog you and stuff. Relationships without that stuff, our friendship, whatever, it's just as important!"

"I know that," Harry says, gently taking hold of Ron's hand on his shoulder, linking their fingers together. "I do. I promise."

"Well, Nott doesn't," Ron's voice is gruff and his face is red, but he grips Harry's hand firmly. "He treats you like he knows you best and it's fucking annoying -,"

"Ron, what we are is different -,"

"I know that," Ron's eyes are sharp. "I'm not an idiot. I know you and I see him and the way he acts around you and ... it's because he's like you, right? He's had some Dursleys?"

Harry stares at Ron. *My life and my secrets*. Harry says nothing but he also knows he doesn't need to. Ron's seen the way Theo moves, he's seen him like a knight on a chessboard. Ron knows.

"He can be like that," Ron says softly, "and you can be you, but you can't stop bad things happening to him, Harry."

"I'm not trying to," Harry protests. Ron snorts derisively.

"You try to stop bad things happening to everyone," Ron rolls his eyes. "You've got your saving people thing."

"Jesus, you sound like Hermione," Harry mutters. Ron punches him in the arm.

"Nott's been good for that, you don't try to do that with him much, or at least you used to," Ron continues sagely. "He makes you happy. And helps you sleep."

"So do you," Harry says, leaning his head on Ron's shoulder. Ron clicks his teeth in exasperation but lets Harry stay there, looking out at the wind in the trees.

Theo does make me happy and help me sleep but he also killed someone for me and thought I was dead and cried. Harry knows Theo's hurting because of him. He can't make it worse.

"Talk to Nott, Harry," Ron whispers. When Harry can't see his face, he hears his voice just like he did in the deep place, strong and oaky and full of roots. Magic that's grounded to the earth. *Keeps me steady.*

"I talk to him every day. I saw him today."

Harry remembers the frantic kisses on the bed, the way Theo's thoughts had been full of desperation and hunger so deep and pure that Harry longed to swim in it.

"And did you tell him?" Ron presses. "I mean, he knows about the Mage stuff but I mean the other stuff?"

Ron's eyes drift down to the cut on Harry's hand. Harry doesn't ask how he knows. Ron's like Hermione, he's too well versed in Harry Potter not to know.

"There is no other stuff," Harry says lamely.

“Right, and I’m the youngest Seeker in a century,” Ron rolls his eyes. “It’s not just nightmares, right? You look like you did last June.”

After Cedric died. Harry swallows and looks away.

“It’s bad, right?” Ron’s words are a question but Harry knows they don’t need an answer. Ron was there, after all. He might not have been on the Astronomy tower with Hermione, and he might not have the same language that Harry and Hermione have when they talk about edges, but Ron was with Harry in the dorm room every night after Cedric was gone. Ron was even sleeping next to Harry in his bed, rubbing his back when he woke from nightmares and whispering comforting words when Harry sobbed desperately for his dead boyfriend. He was there, drooling on Harry’s pillow when Harry slipped out for hours between midnight and dawn to stand at the top of the tower, looking down. Ron was the one who was sitting waiting for him when he came back, reading Quidditch comics with big bags under his eyes. Ron was the one who, when Harry lay in bed staring at the ceiling the day after Harry was released from the hospital wing, carried him very gently into the showers and stood with him under the water, gently washing his hair. Harry knows that even though they don’t speak about the edges, Ron knows that they are there. Ron always knows. Right now, Ron is nodding, as if Harry’s silence has confirmed everything.

“Talk to Nott, Harry,” he repeats firmly. “He’s the only thing that made a difference last year.”

Harry knows it costs Ron a lot to say that, especially given how much Ron and Hermione were both desperately trying to make a difference before Harry was sent back to the Dursleys. Ron is right. Harry remembers the numbness of those days before Theo appeared outside the Scout hut, the complete, raw, agonising despair that turned to a coldness inside his heart he couldn’t shake. *Like now.* But then he thinks of Theo’s snappish tone, his fury at Harry saving him from the jar today. If he’s going to keep Theo safe, it’s going to have to be in ways Theo doesn’t know about, otherwise, he will lose his fucking shit, and Theo seems far too close to losing his shit right now. *I won’t make things worse for him, no matter how bad it gets.*

“His Dad died too,” Harry says quietly. “He’s ... he’s got other stuff to worry about.”

Rather than me cutting myself and having panic attacks and wishing I had gone with Tom. Ron, of course, looks utterly unconvinced.

“I thought you trusted him,” Ron frowns.

“I do,” Harry says. “I just ... I don’t want him to get hurt.”

You cannot be yourself without your true heart, Greenheart, Sahara whispers. Harry ignores her.

“Ah,” Ron’s frown clears up and he clicks his teeth. “You told him then. That you love him.”

Harry blushes and stares down into the garden. *And he loves me too, which means he’s totally fucked.*

“Yeah,” he whispers.

“Harry,” Ron says sharply. “Don’t do it.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t do that thing where you lie really fucking badly to the people you love,” Ron says.

“I don’t do that,” Harry protests weakly.

“You do so.”

“Do not.”

“Last year you lied to me and Hermione about all of the Nott stuff and the Mage stuff,” Ron counts off on his fingers. “In fourth year you lied to Sirius about your scar hurting, in second year you lied to Dumbledore about the voices -,”

“I lie to everyone,” Harry protests, though it doesn’t seem like such a good argument now that he’s said it.

“I’m not talking about how we lie to the grown-ups who aren’t paying enough attention, I’m talking about how you lie to people who love you.”

“Everybody lies,” Harry repeats dully. In that, Harry thinks, Tom has always been completely on the money.

“Not to the people they love,” Ron says flatly. “And you’re shit at it, too. It’s almost embarrassing, mate. Like, you and Nott, last year, you must think I’m as dumb as a bludger because it was so obvious you fancied somebody even when you called him your ‘muggle friend’ -,”

“Alright, alright,” Harry grumbles, flushing deeply. “Jesus.”

“Just ... isn’t it easier to just tell the truth, mate?” Ron asks, brown eyes patient. “Just say ‘I feel fucking shit because my godfather died and all this weird crap keeps happening. Make me feel better, Nott. Kiss me til my hair goes puffy.’”

“My hair does not go *puffy* -,”

“He must really be grabbing, like, handfuls of it -,”

“Ron!” Harry gives him a shove. “Shut up!”

Ron throws an arm back around his shoulder and holds him close. Harry sighs. Ron smells like broomsticks and milky tea and his magic - today it’s like damp wood and strong timbers. *Firm. Safe. Protective.*

“Just admit you feel shit, Harry,” Ron mutters. “It’s not hard. I do it all the time.”

“Do you?” Harry says, twisting his head up to look at his oldest friend's face. “Feel shit?”

“Yeah.” Ron’s eyes glaze over. “I miss Dad.”

Harry swallows. *I miss Sirius so fucking much and I’m so angry at him for dying for me.*

“I miss your Dad too,” Harry whispers. Ron squeezes him.

“Talk to Nott about this stuff, and the other stuff. I talk to Luna and it really does help.” Ron presses. “You’re still you, even after all that.”

Harry feels his heart clench. *Expect to be changed, Master.*

"Maybe," he mumbles. "Not so sure."

"You are becoming yourself, Harry," Luna climbs up onto the roof beside them, carefully clambering up the trellis covered in a climbing rose. She's wearing a bright yellow sundress over her pink trousers to cover her absurdly fair skin and Sahara is draped around her like a grand necklace.

"I'm going to take Medea down," Ron says, scooping up the ferret and eyeing Sahara suspiciously. "Don't get ideas, you."

Sahara hisses at Ron about delicious rodents and Harry smirks, watching Ron sit the ferret obediently on his shoulder and climb down the trellis, then strolling across the tall, dry grass to flop down beside Ginny. Harry sits with Luna, and lets the smell of her magic, the cold water off lakes between high mountains, flow over him and calm him. He knows he can say just what is on his mind and Luna will understand.

"Why is this happening?" Harry whispers. *Why am I always so different? Why did I come back through the veil?*

"Merlin's prophecy," Luna says quietly. "His power would return in England's darkest times."

"I thought *he* was meant to return, not his power," Harry frowns. He remembers this from History of Magic. It gives him a horrible jolt, heart thundering. "Jesus Christ, Luna, I'm not the reincarnation of fucking Merlin, am I?"

"Words are strange," Luna muses. "Can people return from the veil, Harry?"

Harry swallows hard and thinks of the tasteless world beyond it, of Death and the Black Prince and Sirius. *You're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry.*

"No," he breathes. "Just ... just me."

"Just you," Luna nods. "Not Merlin. You. As yourself."

"Me," Harry looks down at the Black diamond on his finger, the promise of a past and a future he doesn't yet understand.

"Power," Luna nods. "Not people."

"Then how can I be of Merlin and of Mordred?" Harry asks quietly, feeling scrabbling desperation in his chest when he remembers the Goblin King's tone and Bill's solemn words. *Necromancers are everything they fear and hate.* "Of a Mage and a ... Necromancer?"

"We are not *them*, Harry, we are not their mirrors," Luna's voice is calm. "We are *of* them but we are not them, after all, they were of something else to begin with. We are of that which made them but we are ourselves."

She sounds like you, Harry tells Death inside his head without thinking. He swears he hears a distant, throaty chuckle.

"I don't understand," Harry whispers.

“Magic. It’s like ripples on water,” Luna smiles. “We are the repeating pattern of what is begun, echoes of magic resurfacing further and further away from the centre. Mages and Fae and Wixen, always patterns.”

Harry’s not sure that Luna’s words make more sense, but the feeling he gets from them, the image of Merlin and Nimue and Morgana and Mordred and Uther being stones tossed into a lake and him being merely a ripple is kind of comforting.

“If we’re just ripples then why now?” Harry asks. *Why me, why you, why maybe Theo? Why us, and why now?* “Is it Tom?”

“What does your Sire say?” Luna tilts her head to the side. “Of why your kind come to be?”

Harry swallows. He’s not surprised that Luna knows about Severus but it is unnerving. He remembers his brief discussion with Severus about Necromancers after the funeral: *The magic of our people, of our past, and the places it grew from has an entirely different attitude. Euro-centric philosophy dictates that any discussion of sentient magic is interwoven with Dark Arts, particularly Necromancy.*

“He says that we ... come from a different place,” Harry stumbles over the words. “Where magic being alive doesn’t mean necromancy but he didn’t tell me what that means. He didn’t tell me where I come from. I ... I don’t think he knows.” Harry looks out over the treetops. “What does your kind say about why I’m here?”

“We say that Oldest and Deepest send you to rebalance what is broken.”

The words from his dream echo in his mind: *We will be justice.*

“To bring justice,” Harry whispers. Luna nods, her blue eyes dreamy.

“Merlin brought balance to Mordred, Dee brought balance when the muggles began to hunt so cruelly and the headless Queen needed to be saved, you have the power to bring balance too if you choose it.” Luna smiles. Harry doesn’t. He thinks this is the very worst idea the universe or whatever decides these things has ever had. He’s not a balance to Tom, he’s the absolute fucking opposite. He remembers Tom’s laugh. *How can you not be mine?*

“If I choose it,” Harry whispers. *What if I choose to do nothing? What if I choose to walk up to Tom with my arms spread wide and let him have me?* Luna nods solemnly.

“We are not foretold, we are not prophesied, we are ourselves just by existing,” Luna’s voice is like water pouring into the deep places of the world. Unstoppable. “There is nothing you have to do, Harry, except be yourself.”

On the one hand, Harry’s glad because he can’t take more prophecies that he has to give his brain space to ignore, but on the other hand, he feels suddenly empty. *I don’t know who the fuck I am anymore.*

“I don’t ...” Harry closes his eyes and thinks of the Black Prince’s eyes. The surety there. *Honoured Mage.* He has to try to trust it. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“That is why you are not alone,” Luna takes his hand. Where they touch, Her skin lights with green leaves under the flesh and Harry’s with gold, tinging his bones. “We are three. There are always

three.”

“Why?” Harry whispers. He still does not understand and if he’s going to be some kind of ripple effect from ancient magic, he’d rather not drag Theo into it.

“Because of the patterns,” Luna says simply.

“Doesn’t seem like a good enough reason.”

“You cannot hold the Sorcerer back from his fate, Harry,” Luna looks at him with eyes so blue and bright they look like the sun on the water. “His destiny is his own.”

Not in the stars but in ourselves. Harry’s not leaving Theo undefended or tangling him up in all of this. Not if he can help it.

“Yeah, well, I shape destinies, apparently,” Harry mutters. “So we’ll fucking see what I can’t do.”

“Hey, Harry!” Ginny calls, standing up. “You wanna play some football? Dean taught me how to shoot.”

Harry grins.

“Yeah!” he gets to his feet and turns to look at Sahara and Luna. He switches into parseltongue.

“Do you want to play football?”

“I want to sleep in the sun,” Sahara hisses and Luna strokes her scales affectionately.

“We will watch,” she says, her eyes fixing Harry with a comforting stare. “I will always watch your path, Harry of Merlin.”

“Thank you, Luna of Nimue,” Harry reaches down and kisses her forehead. A small spark jumps between them and it tastes like grass and sunshine. Luna beams up at him.

“Don’t worry about the words people use,” Luna sighs happily. “They call my kind tricksters, they call us liars and strange folk and odd and dangerous and extinct. So rarely do people call us what we truly are, but you know, don’t you Harry?”

Harry stares at her. He remembers suddenly, Nimue’s words from one of his dreams last week. They are suddenly there, crystal clear and ready on his tongue like they have been waiting to be spoken. He looks into Luna’s eyes and repeats them.

“You are of Earth and Wind and Water and Flame. You come from Oldest and Deepest. You are ... the third that I ... need,” Harry stumbles a little on the words. *I don’t need Theo for this. I won’t need Theo for this. I will keep Theo safe with everything in me.* “You know who I am.”

Luna’s smile is radiant. She almost looks like she is glowing.

“I do, and you will know too one day,” she nods with excitement.

“If you know, why can’t you tell me?” Harry asks.

“Because to know oneself is different,” Luna says simply. “You must know thyself, *Huder* .”

Harry tries not to flinch at the strange word.

“Is that ... “ *Mage* “ Me, in your language?”

Luna nods.

“ *Chons da*, Harry,” she says with a smile. “It means ‘Good luck,’ in Cornish.”

“ Thanks,” Harry turns and climbs down, quickly losing himself in a quick game of football, him against Ron and Ginny. Ron is useless but Ginny is hilarious, seeming to have taken on the model of dramatic tackling with remarkable aptitude.

“Will you stop kicking my bloody shins?” Ron yells.

“It’s called a tackle, Ronald!” Ginny grins, sprinting away with quite a good dribble, only to be intercepted by Harry. “Hey! You have to show me how to do that!”

“It’s called a tackle, Ginny,” Harry calls over his shoulder, sending the ball between the two trees filling in for goal posts. “Yes! And the crowd goes wild! Woo!”

Harry runs around the two of them, doing a poor imitation of a cartwheel before collapsing beside Ron who is glaring at Ginny and rubbing his legs.

“I don’t think Ginny should be allowed to play muggle sports,” Ron grumbles. “She’s mean.”

“You know what you’d love, Gin?” Harry says, standing up and trying to do keepy-uppy with the ball. “Rugby. Full contact. You just literally have to run at people and knock them over to score.”

“Cool,” Ginny’s eyes glitter with excitement. “Let’s do it.”

“Hold up, we need a different ball,” Harry laughs. “But I’ll teach you at Hogwarts.”

“Oh great, so now you’re going to teach her a sport where running into someone *isn’t* against the rules?” Ron flops backwards, arms wide. “I’m not playing.”

“Spoilsport,” Ginny says.

“Chicken,” Harry says.

“Why a chicken?” Ginny frowns.

“It’s what muggles call you if you’re afraid,” Harry grins and drops the ball on Ron’s chest. Ron opens an eye and glares at him but says nothing. “You’re chicken, you’re chickening out.”

“Huh,” Ginny grins. “We say shrivelfig, because you’re shrivelling away.”

“Excellent,” Harry looks down at Ron, he nudges his knee with his trainer. “Stop shrivelling, you fig.”

“Yeah, stop chickening, you fowl beast!”

“Good one, Gin.”

“Thanks, Harry.”

“I miss Fred and George,” Ron mutters. “You guys are the worst.”

“Awww, do you feel ganged up on, you shrivelled chicken?” Ginny giggles.

“Bwaaa bwup bwup bwup -,”

“You’re not seriously making chicken noises?” Ron glares at Harry, who grins back.

“Maybe,” Harry smirks. “Bwaaa -,”

“Harrison.” They look up to see Severus standing in the garden. His eyes drift to Harry’s unwrapped hand in the grass and he frowns. “Your wound is exposed.”

“Oh, right,” Harry looks at it. For the first time in ages, he didn’t notice it. Didn’t even feel it. For the first time in days, he wasn’t thinking about anything but exactly where he is, right now. “Seems fine.”

His Sire frowns but Harry catches his gaze and lets words form behind his eyes: *I’m okay. I’m actually okay right now.* He’s not sure but he thinks he sees the smallest of creases around Severus’ eyes. They might be the tiniest hint of a smile.

“Good,” Severus says softly. “It is time to go home. We must prepare for Rome.”

“For Rome?” Harry looks over Severus’ shoulder. “But that’s not until Wednesday.”

“We think it would be best to go today, Harry,” Remus says. He is walking towards them, shirt sleeves rolled up in the sun to reveal his scarred arms. Bill is beside him, robes cast off and wearing a t-shirt that makes him look younger and more dangerous than before.

“Get you out of Albus’ reach,” Bill says.

By putting me in the Contessa’s, Harry thinks. He looks at Severus, feeling a solid lump, like an undigested piece of bread in his throat. Severus says nothing but Harry feels a twitch in the tethers between them. Feels them tightening. He looks up into Severus’ black eyes and feels the gentle brush of his legilimency, remembers the day on the beach after Arthur’s funeral:

“But you could still find me, if you needed to?”

“I think, Harrison, that now I could find you anywhere.”

“Good. I don’t want to get lost again.”

“You will not.”

Harry nods firmly and looks away. Severus will not be with him but Severus is never far away and that means something, even if he’s still a dick sometimes. Harry takes a deep breath.

“Okay then,” he brushes the grass off his jeans and looks at Remus. “Let’s go to Rome.”

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Letters from Rome

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/child abuse/implicit sexual abuse)

This time, Severus, Remus and Harry settle into a new routine.
Next time, Harry has some visitors to Rome.

No update tomorrow but my friend still has covid, so see you on Monday!

Severus,

We have arrived in Rome well. Our child was excited about the sunshine. He agreed to take the sleeping draught last night and slept until about 2 without waking but he says he will not take something that might make him drowsy for the exams. Kreacher refuses to leave his side and the snake seems permanently attached, even invisible. I cannot shake the feeling we are missing something there.

Remus

-- -- --

Wolf,

I have included an adapted sleeping draught. It has a four-hour cycle. Since the child wakes roughly every four hours anyway, it should allow at least a measure of rest. Please apprise me of his progress once the examinations commence.

S.S.

Severus,

How long did you stay up brewing to make this? His first day went well. His hand aches from writing and from using his wand. He is playing football in the garden with the Zabini heir. Apparently, all Italians are obsessed with the muggle sport, including Wixen. It's good for him to have the company. He seems a little lighter here. The nightmares continue. Will you join us on the weekend?

Remus

Wolf,

I called Kreacher - he has been entrusted with a muscle balm that is specifically suited for the child's needs. I have given him instructions as to how to administer it. I am required in my other capacity this weekend. When does he sit Potions?

S.S.

Severus,

Potions on Monday. The muscle balm helps, thank you. It would be better if you were here too. I've heard from Bill. He's having trouble with Victoria Crabbe at the Department of House Guardianships. She is disinclined to push through the Goblin King's request. The official suggestion has been that we pursue a line of inquiry with Albus.

Remus

Lupin,

The disinclination has nothing to do with Victoria Crabbe. Lucius will give the Goblin King nothing. Likewise, we will give Albus nothing.

Severus.

-- -- --

Severus,

I have not heard a word from you this weekend. Are you alive?

Remus

-- -- --

Severus writhes at the feet of the Dark Lord. Harrison and Lupin have been gone for an entire week and Severus feels every day of it in his bones. His bones currently feel as if they are on fire. This is

his sixth round of the cruciatus curse today. It has been a very, very long weekend. *The Dark Lord really is a motherfucking son of a bitch.*

“In Rome? Why would Dumbledore send him to Rome?” The Dark Lord spits. Severus gasps quickly for breath, keeping his eyes fixed on the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes and on Lucius’ shoes.

“I do not believe he did, my lord,” he whispers because he’s been fielding these very questions from Albus and has already decided on a culprit who is not him or Lupin or Weasley on whom he can place the blame. Someone who can easily take the burden of it from all sides.

“Then whom?” The Dark Lord demands.

“The Goblin King, my lord.”

“The Goblins,” the Dark Lord hisses. “There will be such a reckoning.”

Severus does not feel bad about this. There is already a reckoning due. Especially since the Dark Lord allowed Bellatrix to take apart his Ward.

“We are in a precarious position, my Lord,” Lucius says, a hint of panic leaking into his voice. “We will have them, do not be concerned, but we must be cautious if we are to maintain our hold upon the Wixen public.”

“Do not lecture me on how to manage creatures, Lucius! *Crucio!*”

Lucius is sprawled next to him, screaming, for the great offence of simply making sense. Severus does him the courtesy that Lucius never returns and does not watch him whilst he curls into a foetal position like a child. He feels the Dark Lord’s hand on the nape of his neck, as cold as a corpse.

“Severus, with me,” he demands. Severus staggers to his feet, limping on a left knee that feels as if it is made of jelly, and does not look back as the Dark Lord leads the way out of the hall at Urquart Castle and into an enormous bedchamber. Nagini is folded up in a massive pile of scales before a roaring fire. Severus tries not to look at the bed. If the Dark Lord wants him, there is little Severus can do to stop it. He quickly heaps an avalanche of snow across his mindscape. After all, this will not be the first sexual assault he’s survived. Images of Black removing his underwear in front of a jeering crowd threaten to resurrect themselves, icy and cold, but Severus pierces them through the heart and buries them under snow.

“My sweet Severus,” the Dark Lord purrs. Severus does not feel a thing. Still, when the Dark Lord gestures to the chair by the fire and lowers himself into it, gesturing for Severus to stand opposite him, there is the smallest flicker of relief inside him. “My little Master of the Mental arts.”

Severus bows his head and hides a realisation beneath the snowy ground of his mind. *This conversation will be about Harrison.*

“I bow to your superior skill, my lord,” he says.

“As you should,” the Dark Lord smirks and then looks into the flame with as much pensiveness as a self-assured monster can. “Still, precious student, I have a question for you.”

“I am your servant in all things,” Severus parrots. Circe above, his knee hurts. Severus knows, vaguely, that if he was not violently occluding at this moment he would possibly be screaming from the residual pain in his body.

“Of course you are,” the Dark Lord bares his bloody teeth. “Serve me in this, then, and share your gathered knowledge. Have you ever heard of a situation where ... one might experience ... reverse legilimency? Not occlumency, but an ... enforced sense of another’s mind?”

Severus thinks of his son, leaving words scrawled across his eyes to be read. *Fucking hell, Harrison, what have you done?* Then Severus buries his son, strangles him and digs him an icy grave and heaps snow from a laden tree atop him. He will not feel the fear of this for a moment, not in the presence of such a monster.

“I fear I do not have the wit to understand you, my lord,” he says smoothly. “I have never read of such a thing.”

“Ah, yet there are more mysteries in this world than are found in the pages of your meagre library, Severus,” the Dark Lord jeers. “What I have seen, what I have learned of the deep magic of the world is beyond comprehension.”

“Forgive me, my Lord, for my ignorance,” Severus bows his head. *My library is not meagre.* “Might you explain it to me? Perhaps there is something I have learned that might serve you.”

“Sweet brewer, always so eager to learn,” the Dark Lord smiles. It is as close to the smile he used to wear, when he still wore the face of a man, that he is still capable of giving. It only happens when he is teaching. Or believes he is teaching. “Very well. I speak of a connection between minds that is unsought, unwarranted, and passes across distances. I speak, of course, of Harry.”

Harry. It is a change since Harrison’s capture that Severus loathes, but the Dark Lord now only calls Harrison by his nickname or some other intimate pet name that he prefers. Gone are the days of ‘boy’ or ‘Potter boy’ or ‘Harry Potter’ spat out in fury. Severus never thought he would miss them.

“Is it as it was before, my Lord?” Severus asks. “When you presented the boy with a false narrative and slipped so easily into his mind?”

Severus prays it is this. Something easy to identify and teach Harrison to ignore.

“Oh no, I do not seek it,” the Dark Lord glares into the red flames. “His mindscape is poison to me. After the ministry ...”

Severus does not need more words. Harrison somehow ejected the Dark Lord when he was possessed and it seems that the experience caused such pain for this sadist that he has no desire to return there. Severus buries his pride under snow and ploughs ahead.

“The boy cannot be capable of entering your mind, my Lord,” Severus says with sneering incredulity. It has to be pitched well, as the Dark Lord no longer enjoys insults towards Harrison, which has left more than one Death Eater limping and confused.

“No, he is not so aware,” the Dark Lord shakes his head with a disdainful smile. “I have no need of the mind of the boy, anyhow. He has no secrets from me.”

It takes the whole side of a mountain, acres of snow, to bury Severus' dread and panic.

"He is so unguarded?" Severus asks, folding his arms and frowning as if all of this is merely vexing. "Albus has resisted my every attempt to teach him occlumency, has insisted upon the child's natural defences. How could the boy deceive him so effectively?"

"Oh, Severus, do not worry, my little weapon is not so complicated," the Dark Lord chuckles. "I have no need of his mind because I know his darkest secret already. I have his heart, Severus, and I never need to chase him again. Soon, he will come to *me*."

Severus cannot stop the sharp memory emerging from the ice of his mind. Harrison, when they had a discussion about the Dark Lord's legilimency, described the Dark Lord as "arrogant." Severus had warned him against such thinking, but the child knows his Master perhaps better than anyone. The Dark Lord is indeed arrogant and this arrogance might just save them all.

"Then ... the reverse legilimency?" Severus asks delicately. "It does not contain the same ... poison?"

"It is a matter of hearts, little scholar," the Dark Lord says, tenting his fingers and clearly enjoying this opportunity to teach. Severus is reminded of some of Harrison's memories from his imprisonment. *Torture followed by education, thank fucking Merlin he was never a Hogwarts Professor.* "What I sense from my Harry is only in his sharpest, angriest moments. It is a flash of fury, undirected, an ugly thought or insult toward me that rears its head and then, so quickly, is gone."

Not enough to be devastating, Severus thinks, except to Harrison's mental wellbeing.

"Not long enough to act as a ... window to the boy's whereabouts or doings?" Severus asks. *Are we safe? Is Lupin safe?*

"I have spies enough," the Dark Lord says sharply. Severus bows his head and looks at the floor. "I have what I need from Harry. Little by little, in his darkest moments, he will come to expect me. He knows what I offer him is far greater than what Albus ever could."

What the fuck did you offer my son, you monster? Severus keeps his body and face calm and lovingly kills his anger and rage inside his mind. *Not now. Not now.*

"Then how can I serve you, my Lord?" Severus asks.

"A week ago, these ... flashes, they came more regularly," the Dark Lord says, twirling his wand between his fingers. "His anger is delicious and I dined upon it frequently, little morsels of pain to savour. Yet now, they are ... almost non-existent."

Because he is in Rome and he is safe and distracted and healing.

"The Contessa has her means of protecting her guests," Severus says carefully. "It is possible that there is some kind of barrier, unorthodox, known only to her people, that is stopping the boy from projecting his anger to you."

"The Donas de Fuera, yes," the Dark Lord mutters. "They have such power hidden away on their little island."

“The boy must return to school at some point,” Severus says blithely. “Trust me when I say, my Lord, I am more than capable of lighting the fire of his anger for your enjoyment.”

The Dark Lord bares his teeth. His worse kind of smile. The kind a predator has before it feasts.

“You are so very useful, Severus,” the Dark Lord grins. “Soon, my little weapon will join us. Soon, he will be ours.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Severus bows low, eyes fixed on the stone floor beneath his feet. *He is already mine and he will never, ever be yours.*

“Leave me, Severus,” the Dark Lord waves his hand. “Send Lucius.”

Severus leaves. In the hall, Narcissa stands in front of Lucius, gently dabbing a balm against his lip which he has bitten clean through. Blood stains his chin and two sets of eyes, one blue and one grey, turn to look at him. Severus limps over and Lucius wordlessly offers his face for Severus’ inspection. With Lucius, Severus must maintain an odd balance. Enough distance that warrants a man who has long become disaffected with an old lover but not too much distance to imply any other motivation. *Like him kidnapping my son.* Severus looks at Lucius’ wound but does not touch him. He reaches inside his robe for a vial of pain relief potion.

“Take this,” he says. “He is waiting for you.”

Lucius winces and uncorks it with shaking fingers before knocking it back. He hands the empty vial to Narcissa and leaves them without saying a word. Narcissa gestures her wand as soon as the door closes and Severus knows they are cloaked in silence.

“We need to talk about Draco,” she says quietly. Severus pulls out a second nerve replenisher and knocks it back himself. He already knows it won’t be enough. The adrenalin is diminishing and the pain inside him is growing and he needs to lie down very soon or he might not survive.

“Not now,” he gasps. “Not today. I beg you.”

Narcissa looks him up and down and nods, reaching into her own robes and pulling out some of the illegal stimulant, Illithid’s bane, that she likes to brew for such occasions. Severus takes it gratefully and swigs it down, the aniseed-flavoured potion immediately taking effect.

“That should get you home,” Narcissa says, rubbing his arm. “But Draco -,”

“He’s in Rome,” Severus says abruptly. “Sitting his exams. Draco will have to wait.”

Narcissa takes in a sharp breath but nods slowly.

“He cannot wait long,” she whispers.

“I know.”

Narcissa rests a hand against the side of Severus’ face and for a moment, he closes his eyes, letting himself breathe in that rich, herbal scent of her that surrounds all brewers. He has always found it immensely comforting.

“You miss him,” Narcissa whispers. Severus opens his eyes and sees nothing more than empathy in his old friend’s face. Harrison’s absence is an abscess inside his chest, the building up of despair

and worry so strong Severus feels he might go mad with it if not for the tethers around his wrist.

“Every fucking minute,” Severus says bleakly. He turns his head and presses a dry kiss to her palm before turning and walking out of the door. He is surprised to find that the sun has risen. It is Monday morning and in Rome, Harrison will be preparing to take his Potions exam. Severus takes a deep breath and disappears. He has a letter to write.

— — —

Lupin. I am alive. It was a busy weekend. This morning, remind the child that rhythm is song.

Severus,

Thank fucking Merlin. I am very glad you are alive. I've sent Kreacher to look after you for the day since I am sure you are hiding something.

I will let you know how the exam goes.

Remus

-- -- --

Wolf,

The elf will not stop baking. Please take him back.

S.S

Severus,

Kreacher tells me you are limping. It must have been a very busy weekend. Keep him. Our child says the exam went 'as well as could be fucking expected for Potions.'

The exams finish on Friday. We need to decide if we shall go to Venice or return.

Remus

Wolf,

Let the child decide. We need to have a discussion about the child's connection to the Dark Lord.

S.S.

Severus,

I am asking your opinion. Is it an urgent discussion?

R.

Wolf,

It is, but my instinct says that these are words too dangerous to even commit to pen and ink guarded and warded by the Contessa. I will come to Rome after the exams and we can have a discussion. As for Venice, my opinion matters not. I find myself waking every four hours whatever decision is made. The house is too quiet.

S.S.

Severus,

I think Harry would like that. Your opinion matters a great deal. However, I am surprised you are not sleeping better. I thought a little bit of peace and quiet would be just what you wanted. R

Wolf,

So did I.

Whatever the child needs, we shall do.

S.S.

Severus,

I need you in my bed.

R.

Remus,

I concur.

S.S.

-- -- --

Harry dreams.

Harry dreams he is beyond the veil, in the tasteless world. He is staring at the shadowed triangle with vague curiosity. Death stands beside him.

"Do you know what it means?" Harry asks.

"It means you," Death says.

"Three," Harry looks at them thoughtfully. "Luna says there are always three."

"The Fae is right."

"Am I dreaming?" Harry asks.

"You may be," Death smiles at him.

Harry can smell Sirius, he can always smell Sirius here. The cigarette smoke, the whisky, the cold scent of his leather jacket that Harry longs to press his face into.

"Harry," Sirius says behind him. Harry turns. When he turns it's not Sirius and he's no longer standing. He's on his knees, the cruciatus curse rocketing through him and Voldemort is crouching down to stare at him with his head tilted, his eyes sharp and curious.

"They despise you."

"They don't," Harry chokes out.

"How could they not? You are everything they fear and hate."

"It's not true."

"You have killed, again and again. You are a murderer."

"Stop."

Harry tries to roll away but he can't, Tom is somehow closer, they are both inside the cage. Harry looks down at his hand and it's even more mutilated than last time, Bellatrix has taken every finger and now there is just a diamond in every wound. The letters on his bare chest are stinging and bleeding and he hears Umbridge's cackle. *People shall think you have done this to yourself, after all, it's not a lie, is it?* Tom grins, teeth sharp points and vicious, dripping with blood.

"With me, you would be ... unblemished."

Tom's hand is reaching towards him, an offer and a threat and the pain in Harry's hand is so enormous, so impossible, he just closes his eyes. He wants to be unblemished. He wants to be free.

He wants to be remade.

"Yes," Harry hisses back. Voldemort laughs and the pain is worse, so much worse, and Harry realises too late it's all a lie so much of a lie -

How could you not be mine, Harry?

He lurches awake, gasping.

It's dark in his bedroom in Rome, dark and hot, even with the windows flung wide open. He grips his hair with his hands, feels sparks gathering in his rune marks and thinks, dazedly, how much of a spark he would need to stop his own heart? *Let it all be over. Let it be done. Let me be done.* The sparks begin to increase.

"Master?" Kreacher is suddenly on the bed in front of him, pulling his hands down from his face. Kreacher's yellow eyes are tired but alert. "To wolf?"

"Yes," Harry hisses, nodding. He takes a breath and Kreacher pops him into Remus' bedroom, right onto the wide four-poster bed. Remus is nothing more than a lump under a sheet, but he takes a sharp breath and pulls back the sheet, making space for Harry to clamber in beside him.

"Thank you, Kreacher," Remus mumbles, as Harry settles in beside his godfather. "Edges?"

Harry nods. Remus' clumsy hand find Harry's, checking for wounds. He sighs in relief.

"Ice or bands?"

"Bands," Harry mutters. Remus reaches over to the bedside table in the dark, pulls something from a drawer and then slips a muggle rubber band onto Harry's wrist. Harry gratefully begins to pluck at it, the sharp little sting of it helping a bit. Remus strokes his hair absently and begins to count backwards from one hundred.

"One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight -,"

Harry joins in softly in parseltongue. They've been doing this since they came to Rome. Harry's kept his promise, he goes to Remus when he wants to hurt himself and he knows Remus writes to Severus to tell him in the morning. Remus offers him strategies, things that might help, like flicking rubber bands or holding ice cubes, counting backwards from high numbers. They are all mind-numbingly, comfortingly, drearily muggle. They are the only thing that helps. When Harry can breathe better and speak English again, Remus pauses.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you really see Sirius through the veil?"

Harry pauses in flicking his rubber band.

"Yeah," he sighs into his pillow. "I did."

“Was it...” Remus seems to struggle for words. “Was he ...?”

“He was better,” Harry says, rolling over to look into Remus’ face but his eyes are closed, the white scars on his cheek catching the light from the street lamps outside. “He’s ... he’s got James back.”

Harry sees no reason to mention all the Grim stuff. Remus lets out a low, long breath and then rolls onto his back, lifting an arm so that Harry can put his head on Remus’ chest and be held close.

“Good,” Remus murmurs. “That’s good.”

“Yeah,” Harry fights the sting of tears behind his eyes. *It is good but I miss him so much.*

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to talk about your dream?”

Harry sighs heavily and rubs his nose against Remus’ pyjama shirt. It is soft and old from too much wear and washing and feels divine.

“Tom,” Harry mutters. “Just Tom.”

Remus lets out a long breath.

“Harry, is it ... memories? Or is it ... like it was with the vision? Of me and Greyback?”

Harry’s not surprised Remus is worried about it.

“Memories,” Harry mutters. “Sometimes just ... dream stuff, you know? What I imagine he ... he would say.”

“Is it easy to imagine that?” Remus whispers.

So fucking easy.

“A bit,” Harry huffs. *Too fucking easy.* Harry doesn’t want to tell Remus that sometimes, when he’s really angry, Tom’s actually there, a flash of his thoughts, as if he always knows when Harry’s feeling something bad and has something bad ready to say. That if Harry doesn’t shut it down, sometimes he worries he would talk back to Tom, and not with a sharp insult. *I give up, will you please just kill me now?*

“Whatever he says, Harry, in your dreams or memories, none of it is true,” Remus whispers, holding Harry tightly. “Not a fucking word. Trust me.”

“I know.”

Harry closes his eyes and breathes in Remus’ woodsmoke scent, but Tom’s voice from his dream is still there. *They despise you.* Harry takes a deep breath and starts to count again.

“Two hundred, one hundred and ninety nine, one hundred and ninety-eight...”

Severus,

Last night: bands rather than ice, and lots of counting. Thank you for the book, if you have any other recommendations, please do send them. With regards to Harry's connection, I think we do need a discussion. Soon.

Remus.

Lupin,

I hope this copy of Adolescent Minds in Trauma will be as helpful. In addition to the recommendations I have already made regarding substitutions for self-abuse, it might be time to think about how the child's magic can be utilised to protect him.

The exams finish on Friday. I shall be there first thing Saturday morning.

S.S.

Severus,

Last night, his fingers were sparking.

Remus

Lupin,

He has not 'sparked' since the Slytherin magic was lost. Explain.

S.S.

Severus,

I do not have an explanation, only a hypothesis.

Remus

Wolf,

Then share it.

S.S.

Severus

This theory is still only in its nascent stages.

These facts are to be considered:

1. a) *The Slytherin magic always sparked green*
2. b) *The sparks last night were gold and they seemed to come from under his rune marks.*
3. c) *Harry may be an Heir to multiple magical houses and he may wield those magics in ways we don't fully understand, but he is a Mage and he has his own magic besides.*

This is the theory I posit: what if the magic I saw last night was an expression of the magic he possesses in his own body and soul, as opposed to that brought forth by rings?

These are the considerations I have made to come to this theory:

1. a) *Consider the way that Magnus uses magic. He has no need for a wand. Yes, he has the Dee Heir magic (which according to my research must be some of the most powerful in the world) but he has the magic inside of him.*
2. b) *Could it be that, like Magnus, Harry's own magic is developing a lack of a need for a wand?*
3. c) *If Harry's own magic has no need for a conduit, then it is only governed by his will.*

This leads to an evolution of my theory: if the magic I saw last night was an expression of the magic he possesses in his own body and soul if that magic is without need for a conduit like other wixen his age and is only governed by his will, is it possible that his magic could follow his will when it is bent towards self-destruction? If his lead is to fight pain with more pain, what could he be capable of doing to himself?

As I said, it is only in its nascent stages, research into the wandless magic performed by Bane and other such non-wixen magic-wielding creatures is needed.

Remus.

Lupin,

Your doctorate is showing.

I will find more books.

S.S.

Are you there?

Hey, Theo.

How was Transfiguration?

It was fine but my hand fucking hurts

Well done though

Thanks. Your revision notes helped a lot.

I will send you my charms notes.

I love you, you know that, right?

For my charms notes, yes.

Wanker.

Beloved.

Don't do that!

Why?

Because it makes me blush and then Blaise asks about it!

Oh, Potter, do not hand weapons over so easily. You have no idea what I will do with them.

Two can play at this game, Nott.

What does that mean?

Oh, just you wait.

With breath that is baited.

-- -- --

Defence was really hard.

Oh? I would have thought the practical defence would be your easiest.

I kept accidentally doing shit with my rings instead of my wand.

Ah.

Yeah.

Luckily, in Italy, they are particularly lax when it comes to enforcing limits on Heir ring magic. I doubt they will care.

They asked to see my Patronus.

Ah.

The examiner nearly fainted. Prongs tried to wake him up and that didn't make it better.

I can't imagine that it would.

Blaise won't stop laughing. Can I kill your best friend?

He is your consort-shield. Do as you will.

Oh yeah. Damn. Should have realised that in order to protect my consort he'll have to survive.

Harry.

What?

You can't just go around calling me your consort.

Why not? Blaise does.

Blaise is a shit-stirrer.

Duh. What if I like calling you that?

Then be prepared for a lot of people asking why you're married at fifteen years old.

That's what it means?

It is the signifier of a life bond between Lords and their significant others. Queens, Kings etc.

Wow. Blaise really is a shit-stirrer.

Told you.

-- -- --

When does Granger arrive?

Yesterday.

You didn't tell me.

I haven't seen her. She's not staying with us, her parents have got an apartment on the other side of the river for the week.

That seems unlike Granger.

She wants me to concentrate on the exams.

That seems more like Granger.

I'll see her after History of Magic on Friday. We're all going to the Forum.

All?

Me and Hermione and Blaise and I think Fred's coming out.

I see.

I'll miss you.

I already miss you.

Romantic git.

-- -- --

How was charms?

Not too bad. Wand work is still a pain in the arse. It's so much easier to just do magic rather than get a wand to do magic.

You realise that's a total mindfuck of a sentence, right?

No?

Harry, most people can only do magic with a wand. They don't get the wand to do magic for them.

But they kind of do, right? It's a conduit so ... it's doing some of the work?

I need to do more research into wand lore to be able to answer these questions.

Fair enough.

When will you be back in the country?

I don't know. Remus says we might go to Venice.

For the whole summer?

Maybe.

You didn't tell me.

It's not set in stone.

When will it be?

I'm not sure.

If you go to Venice, will Blaise go with you?

Yeah, probably. He says it's more fun having company in the Castello.

I see. How delightful for you.

Theo. C'mon.

I said nothing.

I love you

I love you too.

— — — —

Theo,

As requested, here is our itinerary for Friday. My Lord and I sit our History of Magic exam at the examinations hall on the Fontana della Naiada at 9 am. The exam is three hours long. Once we have completed it, we will walk down to the Roman Forum to meet Granger and Weasley for a few hours. Then, I believe, Harry intends to have dinner with Ambassador Lupin and the Grangers at a restaurant near their lodgings. We have not yet confirmed if we shall be moving to the Castello in Venice, but if we do so, it shall not be until Saturday evening as Professor Snape is coming to give me a final assessment on my mobility on Saturday. (Also, presumably to see Harry and Ambassador Lupin, but I do not dare to presume).

Now, will you tell me what it is you are planning?

Yours in vow and shield,

Blaise

Blaise,

No, I will not, but you can do me the great kindness of telling me where the best gelato shop is nearby to the Forum.

When it comes to Professor Snape, I find it is always best not to presume.

Yours in friendship,

Theo

Theo,

What an interesting request. On Friday afternoon, the best and most easily accessible gelato will be found in a little street off the Piazza di Trevi. Though I am sure you have no great plan afoot, I will remind you that it is probably within my power to procure a Goblin glamour, should you have need of one.

Yours in vow and shield,

Blaise

Blaise,

I do not have need of it.

Yours in friendship,

Theo

Theo,

Of course. My darling Daphne is the most resourceful of women. Please remind her that if she and Astoria would like an appointment at the House of Biagiotti she only need to ask, the Contessa would be happy to oblige.

Since I shall obviously not see you any time soon, I shall bid my farewells. After all, I would hate to presume.

Yours in vow and shield,

Blaise.

Blaise,

To use a Harry-ism, you are a 'smug git.'

See you Friday,

Theo.

— — —

"How was it?" Blaise asks as they exit the exam house into the Roman sunshine.

"Fine," Harry winces, flexing his right hand. "A long time to write, though."

"You did well without the dicta-quill," Blaise smiles, stepping out onto the crosswalk and guiding them across the palazzo past the shimmering water of the Fontana della Naiada and down the Via Nazianale. Blaise has mostly recovered from the terrible curse from Umbridge, the only lingering pain is his ankle and he walks with a limp. He has a cane that reminds Harry uncomfortably of Malfoy but he just tries not to look at it. "Did you get that question on Wendoline the Weird?"

"Yeah, hang on," Harry pulls out his journal from his bag and scribbles a short message to Theo.

Just finished. On my way to meet Hermione.

Congratulations.

It's a little cold but it's what Harry expects from Theo right now. He's been off ever since Harry told him that he might have to stay in Italy. He sighs and closes the journal.

You should speak your truth to your mate, Greenheart, Sahara's voice echoes inside his head. She's in the Giardino, probably happily chasing mice and lizards around the courtyard, but she's always inside his head now.

Not when the truth hurts so much. Harry remembers Theo's despair in the hospital wing when he thought that Harry was dying. He won't tell Theo that the edges are so sharp.

You cannot be yourself without your true heart, Greenheart.

"Your consort?" Blaise raises his eyebrows in question. Harry nods. "He is displeased?"

"Don't pry, and I told you, *stop* calling him that," Harry scowls at Blaise. They might be friends (sort of) and Blaise is a pretty good footballer for a Wizard and an excellent guide around Rome, but Harry won't talk about Theo with him. Not like he does with Hermione or Ron.

"But it's so much fun," Blaise grins, stepping into the shaded interior of a muggle coffee shop. "Do you want something?"

"Yeah, espresso, *per favore*," Harry says, glancing at the clock hanging over the espresso counter. "Quickly though, we're going to be late."

"Oh, I am sure they will wait," Blaise drawls, signalling to the barista. "Your accent is still horrible."

"I've only been here ten days," Harry grumbles, reaching for the espresso cup and throwing it back with a wince. Since he arrived, Blaise had adamantly refused to allow any of the coffees at the house to be served with milk. Remus hates it. Severus would love it. Harry is finding it pretty good, if there is enough sugar thrown in and he drinks it all at once. "I was alright with all of the goblin questions -,"

"Of course you were," Blaise snorts, sipping his espresso and rolling his eyes. "You've had private goblin tuition for six months."

"- but on the last ones my hand started to hurt, so I couldn't finish," Harry winces and flexes it. "Doesn't matter. I'm not doing History of Magic next year. No way."

"Neither shall I," Blaise says, setting some lira down on the counter and gesturing for them to continue walking.

"Christ it's hot," Harry mutters as they step out into the sunshine again.

"It's actually quite mild for this time of year," Blaise says. Harry feels sweat gather on the back of his neck and looks at Blaise in irritation. Blaise, like all other Italians, looks flawless in the boiling July heat. He's wearing a shirt and blazer and trousers and seems completely unaffected, unlike

Harry, who has tied his borrowed blazer around his waist and has his shirt open at the neck and his sleeves rolled up and is still hotter than he's ever been in his life. As they stroll, a group of students, a bit older than them, pass by. One blonde-haired girl stares at Harry appreciatively, eyes darting to his exposed rune marks and then catches his eye.

"Cool tattoos," she comments, her friends pushing and shoving her as she grins at Harry.

"Thanks," Harry mumbles, blushing.

"Wanna get a drink?" the blonde calls as they walk past, her hands on the straps of a giant backpack. Harry thinks he discerns a German accent. Blaise slings his arm over Harry's shoulders.

"He's underage, *fünfzehn*," Blaise says sharply, "and taken."

"*Noch ein kind!*" One of the student's friends yells and they all begin to jostle their red-faced friend.

"Blaise!" Harry hisses as Blaise marches him down the street, hearing the student's friends laughing behind them. "Stop it!"

"Theodore would skin me alive if I said nothing," Blaise shrugs.

"Muggles, Blaise!" Harry wriggles out from under Blaise's arm and looks furtively around them.

"Do you want to get beaten up?"

"Not particularly," Blaise's dark eyebrows crease together. "Why would I be?"

"Fucking wixen," Harry exclaims under his breath, avoiding Blaise's attempt to hold his hand as he glances back over his shoulder towards the group of students. "We're in Muggle Rome, we're surrounded by muggles, you can't be gay out here!"

Blaise stops walking and stares at him.

"You ... anticipate that we would be attacked for displaying care for one another in public?" Blaise says incredulously.

"Look, I don't know how much you know about this stuff but muggles are not like Wixen. We can't just love anybody and it be okay. Muggles have been killed for it." Harry says sharply, marching ahead and not waiting for Blaise to catch up. Inside his head, he hears Dudley's words: *You're crooked, you're a dirty homo. You're a sick pervert, Potty*. There are things Harry might risk in public, that he might risk for Theo, but he's not about to risk an encounter with the Italian version of Piers Polkiss for Blaise fucking Zabini.

"Harry," Blaise says quietly, hurrying to fall into step beside him. "Slow down."

"No," Harry says shortly. "It's a Catholic fucking country, you idiot."

"Kindly don't tell me about my country," Blaise says lightly. "I may have forgotten the differences between muggle and wixen courtships but there are things you assume, too."

"Like the fact you're an arse?" Harry mutters.

"Like the fact this is muggle Rome," Blaise says, gripping Harry's elbow to stop him from ploughing across a crosswalk, looking the wrong way. "There is no such thing. All Rome is Wixen

Rome, that is why the Vatican has its own city."

"I'd still rather not have to fuck about with the muggle police," Harry says angrily.

"You do not enjoy the muggle Aurors?" Blaise asks.

"Jesus, do they teach fucking anything in muggle studies?" Harry mutters, closing his eyes against the sunshine for a second and taking a deep breath. "Looking like we do ..." Harry waves his hand over his face and then points at Blaise, "...No Blaise, we do not want *anything* to do with the muggle police."

"You imply a racial bias," Blaise confirms.

"I'm not implying, I'm telling," Harry says flatly. He's not an idiot. He may have grown up in Surrey but he's seen the way that Mr Afkar's boys from the shop down the road are always the ones the police talk to about vandalism, even when anyone with eyes can see that it is Dudley and Piers. "So just don't touch me like that in front of muggles."

"If that is your wish, but you should know that the muggle enforcement will never touch me, or you by implication," Blaise says.

"What do you mean?" Harry asks. Blaise shrugs carelessly.

"Muggle police know who I am," he says. "Or at least, that I am important. The Zabini's are styled as a very significant family organisation in muggle politics."

Harry stops and stares at Blaise. *A significant family organisation ... Oh Jesus Christ on a fucking broom.*

"Are you trying to tell me they think you're the Mafia?" Harry exclaims incredulously.

Blaise grins and wiggles his eyebrows.

"I couldn't possibly comment," he drawls, "but there's also this ..." points significantly to a man in a muggle suit walking down the other side of the street and to a woman in front of a bakery. Harry sees the way their eyes flicker towards Blaise and towards him, watching and calculating. "Did you really think that the Contessa would allow you to walk Rome unprotected?"

"So your solution is to break the statute of secrecy?" Harry asks sarcastically. "What would you do? Just obliviate everyone?"

"To protect your safety, of course," Blaise says easily, taking hold of Harry's elbow to guide him over the crosswalk. "There is always a Wixen solution."

"Yeah right," Harry rolls his eyes as they cross the Piazza Venezia, bypassing the towering typewriter building and strolling down Via dei Fori Imperiali on the shady side towards the Forum.

"By the way, does Theodore know about this?"

Blaise gestures to Harry's left hand and the constellation there. It's no longer itchy or red around the ink, just thrums when he holds a weapon. Bill has been coming over to the Castello some evenings after the exams to get Harry used to wielding his axe again. Blaise likes to watch, mainly because Bill sometimes practises topless in the courtyard, and sometimes Harry, Blaise and Bill play

football together. Bill knows nothing about football so it's pretty hilarious. Harry's pretty good thanks to his tutelage from Dean and years of muggle primary school and Blaise happens to be an excellent keeper. Football is a big deal for all Italians, regardless of magic. It's been kind of fun arguing about the Euros. It's not as good as flying, but it's a good feeling.

"Don't pry," Harry snaps. He hasn't told Theo about his protection rune. Partly because he wants to see Theo's reaction in person (wants to feel Theo's lips against the stars and thin lines) but also because he doesn't want Theo's reaction to a reminder of Sirius permanently inked on Harry's hand. Theo's words, all those months ago, behind the greenhouses come back to him: *Stop trying to fucking save him, Harry. He doesn't want to be saved.* Harry reaches for the black rubber band on his left wrist and flicks it. The sharp sting helps.

"HARRY!"

Harry just has time to wince before a wild tornado of black curls and tight arms embrace him, almost knocking him off his feet. His nostrils are filled with the scent of coconut and blackberries. His best friend, here, in Rome, finally by his side and no doubt, ready to tear him to fucking pieces.

"Hey, Mi," Harry chokes, squeezing her back just as tightly as he stumbles back a few paces. "Alright?"

The Second Date

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation)

This is an ENORMOUS chapter. It is so big because I couldn't bear to slice it in half, so enjoy!

This time, Harry and Theo have a second date.
Next time, the date is Over.

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

"Alright? Alright? One of these days I'm going to bloody murder you, Harrison James fucking Potter," Hermione snarls into his hair. "*A tattoo?*"

"I told her it's a protection Rune," Fred chuckles. Harry looks over Hermione's shoulder and sees Fred standing in the sunshine, looking remarkably well for a guy who is still taking about six potions a day. Blaise walks over and kisses Fred on both cheeks and then slips his arm into Fred's, switching his cane to the other hand. Fred grins and leans down to whisper something in Blaise's ear, who grins in a way that Harry only associates with one thing: Blaise being horny. Harry scowls at him.

"Surely an invalid can have assistance, even in the muggle world?" Blaise drawls, raising his eyebrows at Harry, who rolls his eyes and pulls back to look into Hermione's face. She's smiling tremulously, her eyes filling slowly.

"I missed you," she whispers. Harry feels something which has been cold and brittle inside him both break and melt. Harry cups her face and presses his forehead against his best friends'.

"I missed you too," Harry says softly, trusting his voice won't drift to Fred and Blaise. He almost doesn't notice that he's slipped into parseltongue. "*I am so fucking sorry about everything.*"

"I know," Hermione's voice is broken as she squeezes him back tightly. He doesn't question how she can understand him, because he can feel her magic, the strength of it wrapping around him. He can feel the magic in the Potter ring on her finger reaching out to something inside him. There is hot tea in his mouth and the scent of smoking embers in his nose. He misses the Potter magic so much. "I already know."

"*I should still say it,*" Harry whispers. He closes his eyes. He doesn't mean to say anything about it, but the words slip out of his mouth almost without his volition. "*You were so right, Mi. I'm ... I'm all fucking edges. Sirius is dead. Tom is ... Theo is ... and Arthur, and Bellatrix -,*"

"I know," Hermione grips his face fiercely, breathing hard and for a moment, they are on the top of the Astronomy Tower and everything else has fallen away.

"*I didn't mean to leave you alone,*" Harry chokes out, his fingers tangled in her hair. They are swaying slightly, as if in a breeze and Harry does dare to open look beyond Hermione's eyes, the liquid chocolate of them. Warmth. Sister. "*But I'm so fucking alone.*"

"You are not," Hermione says fiercely. "You are not, I ...," Hermione looks furtively at Fred and Blaise. "I have stuff to tell you."

"Let's go into the Forum then," Blaise says easily. "Your guardsman and I can easily distract ourselves out of earshot."

"Easily," Fred grins, an arm drifting down Blaise's back.

"Muggles, Fred," Harry barks, glaring at them both.

"Oh, relax," Fred rolls his eyes. "I'll use spells. No one will see."

"*Peggio per loro,*" Blaise chuckles.

"You're so vain," Hermione snaps. "No one lost anything by not watching you devour Fred."

"Excellent," Fred grins widely at the prospect and Harry groans.

"Come and find out," Blaise smiles seductively at Hermione. "*Ti unisciti a noi?*"

Harry doesn't need an Italian tutor to work out what that means. Hermione flushes and Fred's eyebrows shoot up but he shrugs and tilts his head towards Hermione, eyebrows raised invitingly.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Harry sighs heavily, glaring at Blaise. "Do you ever stop?"

"Being what?" Blaise grins. "Gorgeous?"

"I'm not leaving Harry on his own," Hermione says tartly, "and he's right. You should be careful around muggles."

"That wasn't exactly a no, Hermione," Fred grins.

"*Sì,*" Blaise grins back. "The game continues."

Hermione bristles and Harry knows, just *knows*, that they are on the edge of a potentially very ugly argument about feminism and relationships and Wixen being sexist. It's not the kind of thing he wants to have on possibly the busiest tourist street in Rome.

"Blaise!" Harry barks, jerking his head to the entrance of the Forum. "Let's go."

"Spoilsport," Blaise rolls his eyes. "Just because we all don't have the desire to commit to our first boyfriend for the rest of our lives ..."

Harry glares at him and hears Hermione's breath catch beside him.

"My first boyfriend died," Harry says sharply, feeling a tingling in his fingertips and a rage that has nothing to do with Bellatrix, for once. *Cedric, dead. Cedric, always dead. Over a year. It's been over a year.* He clenches his right hand so the sparks are covered but Blaise sees them and raises an

eyebrow. He flicks the rubber band. Hermione frowns at it. "Not that it is any of your fucking business."

"Harry -," Hermione breathes.

"It's fine," Harry cuts across her and points his eyes significantly at the official in the box, Blaise following his gaze. "Let's go in."

"Of course, my Lord," Blaise says smoothly, leaning on Fred's arm. For once, Harry doesn't correct him. Oddly, even without speaking, Harry feels like he can sense Blaise's apology, his own recognition that he crossed a line. It's not as strong as the way he can sense things with Theo, but Harry can feel it in the consort-shield bond. The regretfulness is heavy against his back and Harry winces.

"It's fine, Blaise," Harry mutters. Blaise is as calm as ever but nods at Harry and he feels the regretfulness lifting. Blaise waves at the official behind the ticket office, who happily waves them into the Forum.

"How did he do that?" Hermione mutters to Harry, smiling at the official as they pass.

"The Muggles think he's in the Mafia," Harry mutters back.

"Seriously?"

"I know."

"I kind of see it."

"Totally."

"Right," Hermione says, gripping his hand and smiling at him broadly. "Let's do some sightseeing! There's so much to learn!"

Harry laughs aloud and leans forward to press a kiss on her forehead. For a moment he feels a flicker of the Potter magic, of sweet tea and fire, and mourns it but it's replaced with the joy of it. The joy of being here, right now, with his best friend, after his last exam, on a beautiful day.

"Alright, Mi," Harry grins. "Let's learn something."

Harry watches fondly as Hermione hands over lira in exchange for a map and guide booklet and holds her hand as she promptly drags him towards a white stone arch, towering over the ruins.

"Oh look, the arch of Titus!" she gushes.

"The what of whatter?" Harry asks blankly.

"We're going up into the Palatine gardens for some ... privacy," Fred says, guiding Blaise down the cobbled pathway. "Catch you guys later, yeah?"

"You were right, you know," Hermione says quietly, as she and Harry watch Blaise and Fred walk up the path, barely taming their flirting. "Wixen don't think about what it's like for muggles."

"Yeah." Harry looks at the ACT UP badge pinned on her shoulder bag. He touches it reverently. "It's bullshit. They should care."

"Yes," Hermione snorts and shakes her head. "But when the main Wixen governing body doesn't give a flying fart about muggleborns, let alone the homophobia that muggle-raised Wixen might experience in the muggle world, who's going to make them?"

"Us," Harry says staunchly, grabbing Hermione's hand. She looks at him fondly for a second, eyes bright, and he thinks she might cry. "Come on, Mi, teach me something about all this old crap."

"It is not old crap!" Hermione says sternly, pushing him, but he sees the happiness on her face as she stares down at her guidebook. "Let's see ... It says here that the arch was constructed in 81 AD by Domitian to commemorate Titus' victory in Judaea over Jewish rebels."

"Huh." Harry squints up at the ancient stone. "Are there Jewish wixen?"

"Of course! You know Goldstein."

"Oh yeah."

"There's never been many Jewish Wixen in Europe, probably because of Titus here," Hermione says, leading him over to a dusty stone step and sitting down on it, stretching her legs out. She nods thoughtfully towards the arch. "Even less after the Holocaust. Most of the Jewish wixen at Hogwarts are half-blood or muggle-born."

"Right," Harry sits down beside her, looking down at his dusty trainers. "Did you have a religion? Before you got your letter?"

"No," Hermione shakes her head and stares up at the leaves of a rustling tree next to them. "My parents are atheists. I think that's one of the things they find difficult about all this."

"What do you mean?" Harry asks. Hermione leans back on her hands. She's wearing jean shorts and a t-shirt with Blur on the front. Harry admires it. "Cool t-shirt."

"Thanks," Hermione smiles into the sunshine. "I've brought you a bunch of clothes, I've got them under a shrinking charm in my bag."

"You don't have to dress me, Mi," Harry mumbles, even though he's grateful.

"Someone has to," Hermione pushes her sandal against his trainers. The bottoms are starting to come unglued. "Doesn't Remus notice this kind of stuff?"

"No," Harry shrugs. "His stuff is the same as mine. He lets me borrow things all the time though."

"Zabini too?" Hermione tugs the edge of his white collar. "This looks new."

"Yeah, Blaise said the night before exams that I needed to wear something smart and when I woke up this was in my room," Harry shrugs. He's worn it every day since then, leaving it in his washing basket when he returns to the Castello after a day of exams and in the morning it's clean to wear again. He suspects house elves but he won't tell Hermione that. Silence falls between them for a moment and Hermione's hand drifts to his knee. Harry swallows. "We need a chat, don't we?"

"You think?" Hermione snorts, squeezing his knee affectionately. "In the time since I saw you last, you've been to another funeral, been to Sirius' will reading, killed an Obscurus -,"

"You can't tell anyone about that," Harry says quickly. He wrote to both Hermione and Theo about it afterwards, since he was pretty sure they'd want to exchange theories.

"- made a deal with the goblin king, got a *tattoo*, moved to Rome and sat all of your OWLS," Hermione finishes, raising her eyebrows at him. "Have I left anything out?"

"Okay, fine, but it's not just me," Harry nudges his shoulder against hers. "You've broken up with Ginny, moved to France, made friends with Fleur Delacour of all people and by the looks of it, kept Blaise completely on his toes for the last three weeks." Harry raises an eyebrow back. "Have I left anything out?"

"I also took my English Literature GCSE," Hermione says promptly. "Had to put all that Shakespeare to use."

"Theo will be jealous," Harry smirks. He looks up when he hears Blaise's laugh from the top of the hill. He catches sight of a dark and redhead disappearing behind some trees and rolls his eyes. "They'd have you, y'know. If you wanted. Fred likes you and Blaise isn't playing around."

"Hmm," Hermione looks down at her sandals thoughtfully. Her toenails are painted blue and they catch in the sunlight.

"Mi?" Harry nudges her. "What?"

"Whilst you were ... y'know, gone, he was really nice to me. Comforting and funny and ... I liked it." Hermione mumbles, scowling at her shoes. "I just ... I thought I might be, y'know, interested in him. Romantically or whatever."

"Okay, well, yeah, that's fine," Harry says slowly. "Blaise definitely is."

"I know, he tells me all the time and honestly, that doesn't make it more appealing because he's interested in *everyone* romantically," Hermione's scowl deepens. "I just ... Does he take anything seriously?"

"Not really," Harry smirks, shaking his head. *Except his Mum, and being my consort-shield.* "Not romantic stuff, anyway."

"Maybe it's boys," Hermione muses dully. "You're all idiots."

"Thank you."

"I mean it, when I was hanging out with Fleur it was just so ... different," Hermione sighs. "She's so smart and funny and -,"

"Fit?" Harry teases softly. "What book did you loan her, Mi?"

"What?" Hermione looks as if she's been caught out. "Who told you that?"

"George. He says he saw her in London, that she stays with Bill and Tonks when she has to work at Gringotts."

“Oh, that, it was nothing,” Hermione rolls her eyes a little too heavily, her voice a little too light. “It was just an old one.”

“Not *Hogwarts, A history*?”

“No, obviously not,” Hermione rolls her eyes.

“Good. That would basically be a proposal.”

“Shut *up*, Harry,” Hermione blushes and nudges him.

“Hey, look, I don’t have a problem if you fancy Fleur, I mean, everyone in the English-speaking *world* fancies Fleur -,”

“It’s not just Fleur,” Hermione says abruptly.

“Okay.”

“Like ... with Greengrass, too - ,”

“I knew it,” Harry whispers with a grin. “Top scores and the most cutting person I’ve ever met? She’s basically your kryptonite -,”

“Oh my *god*, Harry, don’t be embarrassing,” Hermione hisses, blushing deeply. “It’s just that she’s just so clever and the clever boys just don’t seem ...”

Hermione’s brows tighten and she stops speaking, her mouth forming a line.

“What, Mi?” Harry presses.

Hermione takes a deep breath and the words leave her in a rush: “I think I might be gay.”

"Okay." Harry pauses. He knows that this is a conversation only he and Hermione can have, that Ron and Ginny and Blaise and Theo will not get it. "Like, you mean gay in a muggle sense, right? Like how I'm -,"

"Bi, yeah," Hermione nods ferociously. These are terms that exist between them and the other muggleborns they know, they are words they claim quietly, hidden away from the purebloods and wixen-raised students for whom these categories are utter nonsense and unnecessary. Harry wouldn't know how to explain to Ron how terrifying it had felt, how violently scary, at the start of fourth year, for him to confess tearfully to Hermione his feelings for Cedric. How comforted he had felt when she had understood completely, how she had reassured him and reminded him that here, in this world, in the strange castle, they didn't have to be scared. "I think I might only like girls in a ... sexy way."

"Cool," Harry says, holding her hand tightly. "That's fine, Mi."

"Yeah," Hermione says in a small voice. "I like it when boys flirt with me, and Blaise is obviously gorgeous and, y'know, I think other boys are fit too -,"

“Bill Weasley,” Harry coughs and Hermione glares at him like a basilisk. “Sorry.”

"Boys can be fun and, yeah, when they say I'm pretty and flirt with me like Blaise does, it makes me feel hot -,"

"Which you are," Harry says firmly. "Very."

"I know, Harry," Hermione sniffs, smiling at him weakly. Since the start of fourth year and Ron went away, Harry's been unafraid to remind Hermione of this pretty consistently especially when Viktor came onto the scene, with his miles of fans. "But I ... I don't *feel* that thing with them, you know? I think it's why things didn't work with Viktor, I thought it was just the age difference and stuff because even though I was flattered and it was, like, romantic, but it wasn't ..."

"Sexy?" Harry supplies, wiggling his eyebrows. Hermione scowls and pokes him.

"But then with Ginny and then when I hang out with Greengrass or ..." Hermione blushes. "Fleur ..."

"You like her," Harry grins. "That's cool."

"She's too old for me," Hermione flushes.

"Daphne isn't," Harry says.

"But there's Zabini."

"Yeah but they ... they share, right?" Harry struggles for the words, thinking about what Bill said about Tonks. "I think they're like, anchored to each other, or whatever, but obviously Blaise and Fred are a thing so I reckon Daphne would be ... I dunno." Harry shrugs. Wixen seem very odd sometimes. "It seems like they are definitely up for snogging other people."

"I don't ... I don't know if I'm a sharing person," Hermione says quietly.

"That's fine," Harry squeezes her hand. "I don't know if I would be either, but Theo really really isn't, so... you know."

Harry can't imagine a context where he could share Theo with someone else. Just thinking about it makes his chest hurt. *The bond.*

"Like, with Ginny, she definitely isn't a sharing person," Hermione says slowly. "That felt like being trapped, like my future was being mapped out for me. But the idea of being with someone like Blaise, where there's so much sharing, it makes me feel ... anxious. I don't understand it."

"It's okay to feel that way," Harry says quietly. "To, like, not know right now. To be working it all out still, right? Maybe you find someone it works with, it's not Ginny or Blaise, maybe it's Daphne or Fleur, maybe you can just ... wait a bit and see. Maybe there's something in-between being someone's super serious girlfriend and being someone's casual hook up. Are you going to tell your Mum and Dad?"

"About being gay?" Hermione's hand trembles. "I don't know. I didn't tell them about Ginny, I didn't want to, you know, just in case I wasn't sure, but now ..."

"They love you," Harry tries to reassure her. Hermione nods, but her lip trembles.

"It's so fucking weird, being this way," she whispers. "At school, no one cares. I don't think they even really know the word 'lesbian' but at home ... it's a massive deal. For Mrs Weasley, having a daughter who dates girls doesn't even register but for my Mum and Dad ... it could change everything."

"It won't," Harry says firmly. "It won't change how much they love you. I promise."

"Thanks," Hermione whispers. She strokes the back of his hand, her fingers resting on the Sirius star under his knuckle.

"It's healing well," she says tremulously.

"The tattoo or my stumpy finger?" Harry says drily.

"Both," Hermione strokes his fourth finger, where his Potter ring used to sit. "Do you miss it?"

"So much," Harry breathes. "It's better around you, it's like I can feel it a bit but ... yeah. I hate not having it."

"You must still be the Potter Lord apparent," Hermione says. "Like you were when we did Neville's vow."

"I think I'm supposed to be," Harry sighs, "but Gringotts can't release the Potter Lordship ring, for some reason."

Harry has been exchanging oddly cryptic letters with Griphook who has told him emphatically that he needs to come and visit the bank as soon as he returns to the UK.

"Hmm," Hermione strokes the back of his hand, tracing the lines of his tattoo. She turns his hand over and runs her finger along the length of the ugly, healed cut on his hand. "How did you get this?"

Harry tries to breathe normally. Ron's voice pops into his head: *don't lie really fucking badly to the people you love.*

"Glass," he says. "On the beach."

Hermione nods and strokes it softly. Then she slides her fingers under the black rubber band.

"Did Remus give you this?" She asks.

"Yeah."

Hermione nods and sighs knowingly.

"Your edges are bad."

It's been five years. If there is something both Ron and Hermione do well, it's reading Harry.

"Yeah," Harry clears his throat. "How are your lists?"

Harry might have edges but Hermione has lists. Ferocious miles of them, inked perfectly, in notebook upon notebook, ever-increasing the more anxious she becomes. She smiles ruefully.

"My Mum's taken my journal away," she says mournfully. "She says I have to paint or draw something every day instead."

"Dr Granger, putting her A-Level in psychology to good use," Harry snorts, shaking his head.

"In more ways than one," Hermione whispers, holding herself tense. "I have something to tell you."

"What?" Harry asks.

"My parents," Hermione swallows. "They've ... offered to get us out. They think ... they're worried your becoming a cult leader. Accidentally."

Harry stares for a moment, basking in the absurdity of the statement. *Man, I really must seem like Tom to other people.* He doesn't want to insult Dr and Dr Granger by laughing, so struggles to think of why they would even think that.

"Is this about what you said before?" Harry asks, trying not to feel insulted by the notion that he's so stupid he could *accidentally* become a cult leader. "About your parents being atheists?"

"A bit. Wixen might not call it religious, but they're definitely superstitious and exist in a faith-based culture," Hermione sighs quietly. "Otherwise why would they put so much stock in this prophecy malarky?"

"You mean calling me the Chosen One and all that?" Harry mutters, pulling up blades of grass that erupt hopefully between the thousand-year-old stone. Hermione nods.

"Dad finds it disturbing. He's worried that it's basically state-sanctioned child abuse," she says frankly. Harry winces at the word and Hermione squeezes his wrist sympathetically.

"How does he figure that?" Harry asks hoarsely. Hermione sighs heavily.

"In lots of ways, Harry, you're the most muggle out of any of the muggle-raised or muggleborns I know," she says wistfully, "because you basically had to stop being Wixen every summer. You just sort of ... flail through."

"I do not flail!" Harry objects loudly. A few people turn to stare at him and he mutters apologies in terrible Italian.

"It's not your fault," Hermione says soothingly. "But you have this one world where you have to suppress everything otherwise you'll get hurt and this other world where, because you're so famous, people just expect you to know stuff. You're sort of perfect for being a Chosen One."

"You make it sound like I'm ... I'm stupid," Harry mutters, feeling stung. "Like I'm just, I dunno, fucking everything up."

And becoming an accidental cult leader, apparently.

"No, I mean that they can use you, Harry," Hermione says sharply. "That's what my Dad thinks. That they can tell you that you're the Chosen One and it's all fate and some kind of crazy prophetic madness and you'll go along with it, just to survive."

"You think it's all bollocks," Harry says softly. "What Wixen believe? About prophecies and fate and that?"

Inside his head, Harry hears the voice of Death. *An eternal moment.*

"I believe in freewill," Hermione says firmly. "I believe you have a choice and I think, and my parents do too, that everyone is trying to take that away from you. From both of us."

"How?" Harry whispers.

"You're not destined to fight Voldemort," Hermione says fiercely. "Those were all Dumbledore's choices, not fate."

"Maybe," Harry swallows hard, staring at the Black diamond. In his mind, he feels the press of the lips of the Black Prince against it. *Always welcome. Always loved.* "There's ... there's stuff you don't know, Mi."

"What do you mean?" Hermione narrows her eyes.

"I ... I can't explain it," Harry stares up at the blue sky, letting the bright sunshine blind him for a moment. *Especially when I haven't even told Theo yet. Or Remus. Or Severus.* "The veil ... it goes places, Hermione. It's not ... there's a place Wixen go after death, I don't know if it's the same for Muggles, but it's there."

"Harry, you'd been hurt," Hermione says quietly. "Sirius was dead and the veil is clearly a powerful magical object. Maybe it's enchanted to make people think it's a portal, but there's no way to know that there's life after death."

Yes there is, Harry thinks bleakly, *I've met her.*

"You think?" he whispers hoarsely.

"Yes," Hermione says firmly. "This is what I mean, it's a matter of faith. Prophecy, the veil, all this stuff, it's not about what's real or magical properties or physics, it's about superstition. Wixen wrap it up as fact and tell muggleborns we have to believe but we don't. They don't know for sure, not even the Unspeakables do."

It's then, it's at that moment, that Harry realises how utterly alone he really is. Because he knows. He knows what's beyond. He's seen the green land with the swift sunrise, he's met Death and her Grim and he's traversed the veil and he's here, in Rome, with Hermione. It's crashing through him at the speed of light because he realises, horribly, that either he's the person, the only person, who knows for sure or he's crazy. *This is why Severus looked at me like I was bonkers when I told him I'd met Death.* Harry is suddenly struggling to breathe. He's alone. There is a whisper in the corner of his eye, a voice inside his mind that he knows is real, even as his stomach turns.

You are not alone, Master. You have never been alone.

You're maybe a figment of my imagination! Harry finds himself screaming inside his head. Then he feels a cold hand on his cheek and he knows that if he looks up he will see nothing, but he knows she is there. She is always there.

What if all of this is just a bunch of made-up trauma stuff?

You cannot deny yourself, Greenheart, Sahara whispers.

"Harry?" Hermione rubs his back as he leans forward, putting his head down between his legs.
"Are you okay?"

"*Yeah*," Harry hisses slowly, thinking of the meditation exercises Severus has been sending him, written out in letters. *Walk yourself through a familiar process, such as brewing a potion.* Harry falls back on an old faithful; the Broomstick servicing kit manual.

"Are you ... is this a panic attack?" Hermione asks quietly. Harry nods mutely.

"I thought so," Hermione whispers. "Have you ... have you talked to Nott about it?"

Harry nods because he can't speak English right now, and he doesn't think a long explanation in parseltongue of how Theo has seen him have one panic attack, once, but doesn't know he's a fucking basket case on a regular basis would be a good look right now. Hermione, however, furrows her eyebrows.

"You're lying," she says quietly. "You're lying to him too, aren't you?"

Harry sighs out a long hiss. *I promised I wouldn't lie to her face to face.* He nods mutely. Hermione doesn't look surprised. She nods sagely.

"Mum says it wouldn't be a surprise if it was getting too much," she says. "That's why my Dad bought the house, to take us away."

Harry fights to find his voice, to find the English in his throat. Before he can speak, however, someone else does.

"Excuse me?"

Harry and Hermione both jerk their heads up. Daphne is standing a couple of feet away wearing a white sundress and cardigan and very large sunglasses, her wave of dark hair shimmering in the sunshine. Beside her is a boy holding a rose. He is dressed impeccably in a light blue shirt. His hair is short and brown, his build leaner than Harry expects. It's a clever glamour, no doubt about it, he looks as if he could be a distant relative of a Nott if someone was looking for it, but it's in the eyes. Those silver eyes are unchanged and even if they weren't, there's the tug inside his chest, suddenly painful and surprising. *The bond.* Harry's mind is a forest of feelings, relief and fear and love and need and panic and in a split second, without thinking, he has flung open the trapdoor in his mind and flung the book of his worst feelings, the things he will not burden the boy he loves with, (*I cut myself, I try not to hurt myself every night, I sometimes wish I didn't wake up*) down into the water. Then he's scrambling to his feet, sliding his rubber band off his wrist and surreptitiously shoving it into Hermione's hand before stumbling forward and throwing himself into the boy's arms with a gasp.

"*Theo?*"

— — —

Theo has his arms full of Harry, the costly rose dropped on the ancient ground beneath their feet but Theo couldn't care less. *Harry. My Harry. Right here, right now.*

"What are you doing here?" Harry mumbles, his words warm against Theo's collarbone.

"Second date," Theo says distractedly, because Harry looks fucking *amazing* with skin slightly ripened by the constant sunshine and a white shirt that shows his runes and a *tattoo* on his hand (Theo will definitely be coming back to that, torn between the desire to berate Harry for keeping it from him and the desire to tear Harry's clothes off) but Theo is distracted from all of this by the words that he overheard coming out of Granger's mouth. When they approached, he saw Harry nodding miserably, Granger looking stern, and then heard the words "... *that's why my Dad bought the house, to take us away.*" So even with his arms wrapped around Harry, something in the centre of him rejoicing to be touching, Theo's focus is entirely on the Heir to the House of Potter. *What the fuck are you planning?* "Take him away where, Granger?"

"Second date?" Harry exclaims.

"Don't use that tone with me," Granger says stiffly.

"Let's not make presumptions, Asger," Daphne says beside him, smiling and waving to Blaise and Fred Weasley, who Theo sees walking down from the gardens, grinning at them both.

"Asger?" Harry frowns up at him. Theo notices the bags under his eyes. *Still not sleeping, then.*

"It seemed sensible," Theo says, stroking Harry's cheek and switching his attention back to Harry's sister.

"*Where*, Granger?" He demands.

"It's not your business," she says primly, her eyes dancing towards Daphne and then away again. "Hi, Greengrass."

"Not my business?" Theo hisses. He can't help his arm encircling Harry's waist in a proprietary manner.

"Theo, it's fine," Harry mutters.

"What's this now?" Fred asks, as Blaise slips an arm around Daphne's waist and kisses her cheek in greeting, murmuring something in Italian.

"Granger's parents have plans to take Harry away," Theo scowls at Granger. "Permanently."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Fred's eyes flash with a black glitter for a second. "Hermione, what the fuck? You're planning to kidnap Harry?"

"Stop talking at me like this!" Granger yells at Fred, eyes blazing. "This is between me and Harry!"

"Because you're the only one who would be impacted if he disappears?" Theo sneers, sheer panic coursing through his blood.

"I think we should de-escalate," Blaise says quietly, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "People are starting to stare."

" *At what?*" Harry hisses. Blaise's eyes widen and Theo realises that because both he and Blaise are touching Harry, they can understand his parseltongue. Theo frowns. *Why is he speaking parseltongue?* Then Theo notices the twitch in Harry's jaw, an undeniable sign of tension, and feels bad for causing him such stress.

"Well the hissing is drawing attention," Blaise smiles shortly. "Also, you are glowing, my Lord."

Harry stares down at his arms, at his runes which are glowing with a soft red light. Harry shakes his head, like a worried dog and flails his limbs for a moment, as if trying to shake the magic out. Blaise nods approvingly.

"Granger, Please do not kidnap my Lord whilst he is in Rome. He is under the care of the Contessa and she would be forced to hunt you," Blaise says breezily to Granger. "Also, there is Ambassador Lupin to consider."

"Oh yeah, Remus would be super pissed," Fred nods sagely.

"I'm not trying to kidnap him!" Granger scowls at Blaise, catching Harry's hand in her own. Theo fights the urge to pull Harry away, suddenly overwhelmed by the fear that Granger would suddenly apparate away with the boy he loves, somewhere in the muggle world where Theo could never find him.

"Then why did you suggest precisely that?" Theo growls.

"I told him that I have a plan, I didn't say I would kidnap him!"

"Okay, can we stop using that word?" Harry snaps, a pulse of white light bursting out of his fingertips, making Daphne and Blaise and Granger all jump. "And can we all chill out for one fucking second?"

"Yes, let's do that," Blaise says smoothly. "My Lord?"

He gives Harry a significant look that Theo doesn't understand until he feels Harry taking a shuddering breath beside him. Theo watches as Harry clenches and unclenches his fist, the Black magic dimming. Blaise nods approvingly. Theo tries not to hate the fact that Blaise and Harry have developed this personal short hand in the two weeks they've been living together, but it is very, very hard.

"Look, it's fine," Harry says slowly, looking between Granger and Theo significantly. "Mi, I - I can't do that. Even if I wanted to take your Dad up on his offer -,"

"If you wanted to?" Theo mutters. Harry pinches his hand where it rests on Harry's hip.

"I can't anyway. I have ... commitments. I have to go back to Hogwarts this year. Deals have been made."

"Deals?" Fred frowns.

"Interesting," Blaise mutters. Theo is relieved that at least only he seems to understand what Harry is talking about. *The deal with Dumbledore. Return to Hogwarts and keep Snape safe.*

"I knew you couldn't do it, Harry, I've told Mum and Dad that and nobody is *plotting*," Granger says, giving Theo a filthy look. "But it was the right thing to do, to offer it. And I ..." Granger

sniffs. "I just don't want you to die."

Theo can hardly argue with that. Harry leaves his side, engulfing Granger in a tight hug. Fred and Blaise and Daphne all retreat for a moment. Theo lingers close enough to hear the muffled words between them.

"You can go without me," Harry whispers. Theo feels a desperate ache in the bond and knows how much it costs Harry to say this. Theo can't help reaching out to rub Harry's shoulder. *I'm here. I'm not leaving you.* "You'd probably be safe."

"I can't," Granger sniffs. "You're my brother, I'm your Heir -,"

"So weird," Harry chokes out.

"So fucking weird," Granger gasps. "But even if I went I'd still be a black lesbian muggleborn, I'd still be me and ... you matter too much."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispers in a broken voice. "I'm sorry it's always me, I'm sorry, I can't stop any of it happening, I can't stop people dying, Mi, I keep trying -,"

"I know, I know," Granger's voice is choked. "Me too. Nothing's enough. I'm not smart enough -,"

"You are, you totally are," Harry growls fiercely, pulling back with his hands on Granger's shoulders, glaring at her with all the conviction in the world. "I promise you are, this is just - this is next-level bullshit. I'm sorry, it's my fault -,"

"It's not," Theo says automatically, even though his voice is too soft to be heard by them. Still, he thinks Harry has heard it because he drops one hand so Theo can link his fingers with Harry's and squeezes softly.

"It's not, it's him," Granger's voice is just as fierce. Her brown eyes are alight suddenly with fire. "It's all *his*. Bloody Voldemort."

"Precisely," Theo says. Harry nods wearily and closes his eyes for a second. Theo wonders if he believes them.

"Let's not talk about Tom," Harry says with a strained smile. Theo tries not to be disconcerted by how Harry switches from "Voldemort" to "Tom." Harry tugs Theo's hand. "I heard something about a second date?"

"Something like that," Theo smiles tightly. "I mean, they all need to chaperone us as you can't just wander around Rome with someone who's not Blaise -,"

"Happy to serve, my Lord," Blaise grins and winks at Theo. "And to recommend gelato spots."

Theo blushes but Harry's eyes widen with excitement.

"Gelato? Really?" He stares accusingly at Blaise. "This is why you haven't let me have any gelato?"

"Some things are best experienced for the first time with the right person," Blaise shrugs and Theo finds himself immensely grateful for his wily friend, especially when Harry looks at him with such utter wonderment in his eyes.

“You came all this way for me?” Harry whispers. Theo swallows hard because it is very difficult not to kiss him when Harry is looking at him with those wide, impossibly green eyes and lips slightly open with amazement.

“Just a quick portkey,” Theo teases. *I would cross galaxies for you.* “ Shall we go?”

Theo holds out his hand. Harry looks down at it eagerly and then stares around, eyes creased with worry.

“I want to, I’m just ... muggles,” Harry mumbles.

“He’s being paranoid,” Blaise says, rolling his eyes. Theo notices the way Harry blushes and scowls. He remembers the kind girl in the service station on the M1 last summer and Harry’s panic at being touched. He remembers his promise. *Harry, I swear I will not out you in any way.*

“He’s not,” Theo says and feels a flush of delight when Harry shoots him a grateful, besotted look. “Let’s all walk together.”

They walk alongside one another, Blaise and Fred leading the way, Blaise leaning on Fred’s arm in a way that leaves nothing to the imagination, despite Harry glaring at them surreptitiously. Granger and Daphne walk in front of Theo and Harry and they overhear the two girls’ stilted conversation.

“So, you just came out so they could have a date?” Granger asks her voice tight. “That’s really kind, Greengrass.”

“No, I came for the fashions,” Daphne says. “The Contessa has an excellent connection to Valentino.”

“Oh.” Theo watches Granger’s scrunched-up, puzzled face in amusement. “Is that ... shoes?”

Harry smirks with laughter beside Theo and shoots him a sideways look. Then he jerks his head, hands stuffed in his pockets, clearly indicating he wants them to linger for a few steps. Theo is happy to comply.

“I’ve got a secret,” Harry whispers. Theo’s heart lurches. *Finally.*

“Oh?” He raises his eyebrows, hoping with every heartbeat that this is the moment Harry reveals to him why he is different since he crossed the veil.

“My friend likes your friend,” Harry grins, his voice light and sing-song as he nods towards Daphne and Granger. Theo swallows back his disappointment. *A date. This is a date. It’s okay to talk of lighthearted things.*

“Is that so?” Theo looks at the two women appraisingly. It is always hard to judge Daphne’s interest, like trying to read the intentions of a shark, but she is keeping step with Granger exactly and turning her face to listen to her animated monologue about Italian wixen customs of which Daphne already knows all there is to know. “It’s possible that it’s returned, I suppose.”

“Romantic,” Harry snorts, and his eyes drift over Theo’s face. Theo is suddenly self-conscious.

“Is it okay?” He asks, rubbing an eyebrow. “It’s ... a Mastery level glamour. I haven’t got it quite right yet.”

“Of course it is,” Harry shakes his head, amused. “You’re so fucking smart.”

From anyone else’s lips, it sounds like a barb but from Harry’s, the words are full of reverence and Theo glows.

“I was worried when I couldn’t get my eyes to change.”

“I’m glad you couldn’t, your eyes are amazing.” Harry stops for a moment and gently pretends to be fixing the collar of Theo’s shirt. For a second, Theo finds it hard to breathe. “It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

If I were perfect, I would know what you’re hiding from me.

“How have things been?” Theo asks gently, resisting the urge to take hold of Harry’s hand. He notices a blunt cut across his left hand and makes a mental note to ask about it later. “Since the obscurus?”

“Okay,” Harry shrugs and begins to walk again, stuffing both hands into his pockets. Theo realises instantly from Harry’s tone that he will not get more elucidation on the subject. He tries to resist the urge to push. There are so many things he wants to talk to Harry about but he feels like it would be impossible to sacrifice the wily, playful look on Harry’s face right now. *He looks so happy and he’s been so unhappy. I can give him this.* “So what makes gelato worthy of a second date?”

“You’ll find out,” Theo smiles at him. “Here we are.”

Harry sucks in a breath and looks around the Piazza, at the tumbling fountain and the white marble statues made glossy with foaming water.

“This is beautiful,” he whispers, astonishing green eyes wide. “I’ve not been here yet.”

Theo is once again momentarily grateful for Blaise, who he knows has been Harry’s tour guide, for saving this special spot for he and Harry. He shoots his friend a grateful glance who only shrugs, deferentially, and wiggles his eyebrows.

“Smug git,” Theo mutters to him, and Blaise grins even wider.

“Hey,” Fred says, nudging Harry. “I’m going to get Zabini tipsy while you eat ice cream, okay?”

“Of course you are,” Harry rolls his eyes.

“He’s under the legal drinking age,” Granger frowns.

“I’m a Zabini,” Blaise says, as if that’s enough. Granger scowls. Theo can see that she clearly has no appreciation for a society where children are taught to discern between a Sangiovese and a Barbera at an early age.

“Hermione, it’s not illegal for him to drink, only buy drinks,” Fred says placatingly, “and I’ll be buying all the drinks.”

“You gentleman,” Blaise grins and then looks at Daphne and Granger. “Will you join us?”

“No, there’s a Michelangelo in one of these churches,” Granger says, pulling out a guidebook. “Greengrass is going to show it to me.”

“You despise Renaissance sculpture,” Theo says to Daphne, who gives him a hard stare.

“Who gave you that impression?” She says loftily.

“You, when you said at the British Museum, ‘I despise Renaissance sculpture,’” Theo deadpans. Harry snorts beside him. Daphne’s face doesn’t move.

“Maybe I’ve revised my opinion,” she says.

“Since last week?”

“Oh, Asger, do not tease,” Blaise laughs, tucking a strand of Daphne’s hair behind her ear. “Have fun, *tesoro mio*.”

“You also,” Daphne gives Fred a weary smile. “Amaro makes him vomit like an *ubriaco* .”

“Good to know!” Fred grins, tossing his arm around Blaise’s shoulder and leading him away, as Daphne and Granger disappear towards a church, heads bent over the guidebook. Theo looks at Harry, who is biting his lip and suppressing a grin.

“I think my friend likes your friend,” Theo says. Harry snorts with laughter and covers his mouth with his hand.

“Renaissance sculpture, you are such a Slytherin, aren’t you?” Harry shakes his head. Theo stares for a second at the way the light catches rare, golden threads inside his hair. *Is it magic?*

“At your service, Heir of Slytherin,” Theo grins, his eyes snagging on Harry’s tattoo but he doesn’t want to talk about it, not yet, not until he can touch it. “Shall we?”

Theo follows Blaise’s mental instructions to the small gelato shop away from the teeming muggle tourist shops, and knows it is worth the small diversion when Harry’s eyes widen like saucers.

“I have never seen this much ice cream,” he says reverently, gazing over the mounds of gelato inside the small, wixen owned shop, their flavour tags bobbing above them with a well-placed hover charm. “*Ever*.”

Theo feels as if his smile might split his cheeks. He laughs over Harry’s indecision and exclamations over unusual flavours (“*Zuppa Inglese!* It’s *trifle* flavoured, Theo!”) and happily hands over lira for Harry’s two cones and Theo’s one loganberry cone, despite Harry’s protestations.

“It’s a date, Harry,” Theo says sternly. “I’m paying.”

“Yeah but you organised the dancing on our last date,” Harry says, licking his tiramisu gelato and adorably, getting some on his nose. “I feel like I should do something. It’s only fair, right?”

“Well, this won’t be the last time we do this,” Theo taps a finger against the side of Harry’s nose, resisting the urge to kiss it off and watches Harry wipe his face with a napkin. “The next date is on you.”

“Brilliant,” Harry grins. “Quidditch tickets it is then.”

“I thought you loved me,” Theo says and Harry snorts into his ice cream, coughing and grinning.

“Wanker,” he says, shoving Theo gently with his shoulder.

“That’s a pretty rude thing to say about someone who just bought you *two* gelato cones,” Theo stares pointedly at Harry’s second cone, the absurdly named *Puffo* gelato which is bright blue, aniseed-flavoured and covered in what looks like muggle sweets. Theo cannot imagine anything worse.

“Oh, it’s not for me,” Harry chuckles as they sit on the edge of the Trevii fountain. Harry looks over his shoulder and then down at the Black ring, thoughtfully. “Kreacher?”

The elf appears and Harry twitches his hand, white light jumping out to encase them and Theo knows, from the way that surrounding tourists avert their eyes, that they are invisible.

“Master calls?” Kreacher’s eyes fix on Harry’s hand and, almost exactly like Harry’s did, almost boggle out of his eye sockets. “Master has icy treats without *Kreacher*?”

“No, you idiot, this is for you!” Harry says hastily, holding out the bright blue cone. Kreacher grabs it and, in the most ridiculous fashion, opens his jaw wide and swallows the entire cone. “No, you numpty, it’s cold!”

Kreacher’s eyes widen. His mouth flattens, as do his ears. His head begins to tremble and for a moment, Theo is sure the little elf is going to explode.

“Kreacher?” Harry pats him on the head hesitantly, handing his cone to Theo to hold. “You remember when I asked you if snakes can get brain freeze?”

“Yes,” Theo says drily. “Perhaps stop feeding your creatures iced sugar?”

“Well, we creatures, we like iced sugar,” Harry quips, quirking his lips into a smile. Theo stares for a second, brain struggling to compute the information.

“You ... you’re terming yourself that way?” Theo asks quietly.

“Well, yeah,” Harry shrugs a little uncomfortably. “I’m not entirely wixen, am I?”

“You’re entirely trouble,” Theo says, and he knows it’s the right thing to say because Harry’s shoulders relax and he smiles warmly at Theo.

“It doesn’t bother you then?” Harry asks. “Having a creature ... whatever?”

Boyfriend. Lord. Mage. Mate. Partner. Beloved.

“Harry it wouldn’t bother me if you were a vampire,” Theo says emphatically. Harry raises his eyebrows. *Did he really think I would reject him over this? Over a word for what I already know he is?*

“Even if I wanted to eat you?” Harry asks blithely and Theo chokes on a bite of ice cream, struggling to breathe. Harry just looks at him quizzically and Theo stares at him, eyes streaming. *Oblivious. Utterly oblivious.*

“Promises, promises, Potter,” Theo coughs, then stares directly into Harry’s eyes.

“What?” Harry frowns and then a glorious flush spreads up his neck. “Oh! You! You ... utter shit.”

“Weapons,” Theo grins and takes a lick of ice cream. “You do give them so easily.”

“Oh do I?” Harry raises his eyebrows and then lays a subtle hand against Theo’s thigh. “We’ll see.”

Theo gasps, because Harry has fed astonishing desire through the bond. It’s Harry’s desire for Theo, and it’s breathless, it’s vibrant, it’s twinging with twitching muscles and aching need and Theo almost drops both ice cream cones in surprise. It’s not a hurricane but it’s amazing, none the less. Harry is grinning innocently at him, utterly aware of what he’s done.

“I told you,” he says smugly, turning to Kreacher as Theo simply stares, trying to breathe through his longing. *I will not mount Harry Potter on the Trevi fountain. That would be foolish. I will not do that.* “How you doing, Kreacher?”

“Kreacher ... brain ... cold ...” Kreacher croaks, then he takes a huge breath and sighs, eyes dazed as he looks almost completely blissful.

“Kreacher?” Harry taps his wrinkly pate and Theo sees a little spark from his fingers. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Kreacher croaks, his eyes fixing on the cones in Theo’s hands. “Kreacher is fine.”

“Oh no you don’t, you little dick -,” Harry lunges forward, but Kreacher is too fast. In one moment, Theo is holding two gelato cones above his head and wishing he had a third hand to hold a knife in, and the other, his hands are empty, Kreacher’s cackle has filled his ears, and Harry has been sent tumbling into the fountain.

“Harry!” Theo turns to help, but is momentarily stopped by the sight of Harry Potter, rising dripping wet, a see-through white shirt clinging to his torso, his rune marks dark and glistening, out of the most famous fountain in Rome. *This is not helping.*

“Well,” Harry spits out water and pushes his sopping curls out of his eyes. “I’m really glad I was invisible for that.”

“Are we still?” Theo asks, his mouth dry.

“Uh huh,” Harry winces and clammers ungainly out of the water, his shoes squelching.

“Can I kiss you please?”

Harry squints at him from under damp eyebrows.

“Errr yeah?”

Theo leans forward, his hand rising to tangle into wet curls, and kisses Harry, as softly as he can possibly bear to. There is no hurricane, Theo misses it but for a second the world is perfect. The taste of cream and rum on Harry’s lips, the slight clicking sound he makes in the back of his throat, the warmth of his skin that has nothing to do with the sun and everything to do with magic. It’s all perfect and Theo is overwhelmed, suddenly, wanting more and frustrated with not being able to have it. He pulls away with a gasp. Harry is breathing heavily, his green eyes running over Theo’s face greedily and he looks around, worry in his eyebrows.

“Can we ... can we go somewhere a bit more private?” Harry breathes. “I just ... I want to kiss your real face.”

Theo doesn't think a better request has ever been made of him.

"Come on," he says, rising from where they stand. Harry follows him, clenching and unclenching his left hand and suddenly, Blaise and Fred, who are sat at a table on the edge of the Piazza with small glasses of beer, fall about laughing.

"Did you go for a swim, Harry?" Fred shouts, doubled over.

"Told you I was glad to be invisible," Harry mutters as they walk towards them.

"We're going to the Pantheon," Theo says to Blaise. "For privacy."

"Very well," Blaise smirks, looking over Harry's sodden shirt. "I must say, my Lord, that the shirt looks even better on you wet."

"Fuck you," Harry scowls. "Tell Mi where we went. To the Panthe-thingy."

"If she and Greengrass ever emerge," Fred wiggles his eyebrows. "Renaissance sculpture, after all."

Theo rolls his eyes and leads Harry down several back streets to the Pantheon, barely speaking because his throat is so tight with need and want and if Harry speaks, Theo might just push him against a wall and devour him, not caring who sees. Theo's relieved when they finally enter the Piazza a few minutes later, Harry's footsteps slowing as soon as they approach the great, ancient building swarmed on every side by muggle cameras and touring groups with flags.

"This is privacy?" Harry exclaims. "It's a fucking tourist trap!"

"With wixen secrets," Theo says, jerking his head. "Come on."

Theo guides Harry inside, side stepping tourists, and across the great, mesmerising floor until they come to the statue of Agrippa. Harry looks up at it, frowning.

"It looks older than the others."

"It is," Theo says shortly, reaching surreptitiously for his wand and tapping the feet of Agrippa.

"It's the only original statue left. Agrippa was Wixen. Here -,"

In a niche of the wall beside the statue, one of the portraits of the Virgin Mary swings open.

"What the fuck?" Harry mutters.

"It's like Diagon Alley. Secret wixen entrance. There's a museum under the floor that's accessible only to wixen."

"That's where we're going?"

"No, we want privacy, remember?"

Theo bustles Harry through it into the darker stone corridor, taking a rapid turn left, happy that he memorised the secret Wixen tunnels that run behind and underneath the pantheon. He knows there is a small nook about three feet on the left that will be a perfect location to remove a glamour. Unafraid of being seen by muggles, he grabs Harry's hand and pulls him into it, golden light

shafting through tiny slits in the outside wall, making an enchanting pattern on Harry's face. Theo lifts his wand and presses it against his temple.

"Ego sum ego et solus me," he whispers. The removal of the glamour is like someone stripping paint off his face and Theo winces, but it's worth it for Harry's smile. He immediately lifts his fingers and runs them through Theo's longer, natural hair.

"Hey," he whispers.

"Hi," Theo swallows hard. There's so much he wants to say, so many questions he has to ask (*what are you hiding from me? Why do I feel like you are keeping a part of yourself back from me and no matter how close we are, I can't reach it?*) but his tongue can't move. He wants everything, he wants too much and oddly, it's making it impossible for him to move or do anything.

"It's nice down here," Harry says softly, his green eyes lit from within with desire. "It's quiet."

"Yeah," Theo says hoarsely. *Why can't I think of anything to say?*

Wordlessly, he catches Harry's wrist. His fingers interlace with Harry's on his left hand, carefully avoiding touching the black diamond or Harry's half finger. The hand still trembles constantly, but it seems to tremble less when Theo is touching it.

"You got a tattoo," Theo blurts out.

"Yeah," Harry snorts, his face full of a fragile curiosity. "Do you like it?"

"Why? Are you trying to impress me?"

"As if," Harry rolls his eyes in a way that lets Theo know joyfully that partly, this is absolutely the reason for the tattoo. "It's practical. Look -,"

He clumsily rolls up his sleeve and pulls his basilisk fang out of his holster with his left hand. Theo stares in amazement as the tremor ceases as soon as Harry grips the fang.

"How?" Theo whispers, unable to stop his eyes from raking over the assortment of stars that he knows is Canis Major.

"It's a protection rune, *Anzars* have them," Harry says quietly. Theo sees slight anxiety in Harry's eyes. "I wanted your rune but Sev- Snape said it was too obvious so I got this to piss him off."

Theo laughs and reaches out to touch the ink on the back of Harry's hand. *I wanted your rune.* For that, Theo can endure the mark of Sirius Black on Harry's body, especially when all Theo can think about is how much he wants to kiss it. To lick it. He swallows hard.

"Of course you did," he traces the star underneath Harry's half finger. "How ... how does it feel when I touch it?"

"Bit tingly," Harry's eyes are bright and he seems a little breathless. Eager, maybe.

"What about when I do this?" Theo presses his lips against the ink and hears Harry gasp. *Perfect.*

"Fuck," Harry pushes Theo against the wall of the small stone alcove and Theo is being kissed as ferociously as he's dreamed of being kissed for the last few weeks. It's not a hurricane but there's

pure want, pure need surging through the bond, Harry's want and need, and Theo feels like he is floating through sunshine. "I've been thinking about you doing that for fucking *ages* -,"

"I would kiss every mark on your body," Theo says fervently, forgetting that Harry is covered in scars, literally everywhere, because of Umbridge. Harry flushes and Theo is full of regret, worrying that Harry will withdraw, just the thought of it makes Theo flicker with fear, but Harry has a surprisingly mischievous and stubborn look on his face.

"Yeah?" Harry grins. "Okay then."

"Harry," Theo swallows hard, trying not to dig his fingers into Harry's hips or to trace his fingers upwards over Harry's thin ribs underneath his wet shirt. "I was ... I didn't mean ... I ..."

But Theo can't finish speaking because Harry has moved his left hand to the front of his shirt and vanished all of his buttons with a flash of the Black magic and is eagerly shrugging it off his shoulders and letting it drop to the stone floor.

"You what?" Harry says breathlessly, running a hand through his hair, the holster on his bicep dark and alluring, making his curls rumple around his head like an adorable halo. Harry's as thin as he was in December before Snape started implementing the daily replenishing potions, and whilst the marks of Bellatrix's torture have faded to soft brown scars, the scars of Umbridge still look as if they were made yesterday. Then there are Harry's runes, which flicker with magic under the skin, and the runes on his back which seem to be giving off a pearly sheen. *No one on earth is this fucking beautiful.* Theo is utterly lost. Harry grins knowingly. He leans forward and kisses Theo, biting his bottom lip very slowly.

"I did say, didn't I, that two could play at this game?" Harry whispers. Theo shivers. If this is revenge, Theo is more than happy to endure it.

"You did," Theo whispers. He takes hold of Harry's bare hip bones, jutting out of his trousers and guides him gently so his back is against the stone, with Theo's warm hands protecting his chilled shoulder blades from the hard wall. Then Theo tentatively leans forward and presses a reverent kiss against the 'o' shaped scar at Harry's collarbone. Harry shudders and there is soft gold light on his skin that pulses. Theo wants to eat it up. "Beloved."

"Oh shut up and kiss me," Harry says breathlessly, digging his fingers into Theo's shoulders but Theo can see the joy in his eyes, can feel it in the centre of his chest like a burning sun. *The bond.* This is what Harry wants, what Harry *needs* and Theo couldn't agree more.

"My pleasure."

Theo sets to work, kissing as many scars as he can find and Harry is gasping in that perfect way that he does and suddenly, Harry has wrapped his legs around Theo's waist and Theo is holding him up, trailing kisses across his chest whilst Harry bites, actually literally bites down on his neck. Theo doesn't know how it's happened, he's unsure if time is moving differently or Harry moved them both with magic. All Theo knows is this is every dream, every idle thought in the shower, every moment of longing he has had in their time apart and now it is being pulled out of him every time that his lips meet Harry's flesh. *Fuck, fuck, fuck he feels amazing, I missed him so much -*

"I missed you too," Harry gasps, titling his throat back so Theo can bite down on his rune mark. Theo groans because he's forgotten how it feels to have his mind read by Harry. *Fucking Odin, it's amazing.* "I missed you so fucking much -,"

Then Theo hears something, those senses honed from years of hunting and being hunted pulling him out of magic and bliss. *Danger*. He stops, his lips millimetres away from Harry's, their breath mingled together.

"What?" Harry asks, eyes glazed in a way that is very fucking distracting.

"I heard someone," Theo whispers.

Harry stills. Harry listens. Theo can almost feel the keening magic of him stretching out from his skin, trying to sense another person. Then Harry's eyes widen.

"Fuck," Harry is scrabbling down from Theo, pulling his shirt back over his shoulders. "Lemons."

"Harry, what -?"

Harry clamps a hand over Theo mouth and shoves him into a corner, breathing heavily, eyes wild with panic. Theo doesn't know how to make it better, doesn't know what's happening, but before he can ask a familiar silhouette rounds the corner and Harry's shoulders sag.

Well, fuck.

"Harry. Mr Nott. What a surprise to see you," says Professor Dumbledore.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Dumbledore's Vow

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/mentions of child abuse)

Updating now because I have a busy day tomorrow. Another big chapter, the next will be shorter and more of my normal length.

This time, Harry has words with Dumbledore.

Next time, Severus has words with Harry.

Big reminder: Harry is fifteen. He is a hormonal overwhelmed queer adolescent boy with PTSD and depression to boot and he is grieving. When I remember myself at fifteen ... anyway, don't judge my boy too harshly.

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

"Professor Dumbledore," Theo says coldly, gripping Harry's hand very, very tightly as they turn to look at him. Harry can't help but stare at his old mentor, dressed head to toe in what looks like the kind of outfit an old explorer wore. It seems to be some kind of beige khaki jumpsuit with long beige socks pulled up to his knees and an odd-looking hat on his head. "How ... nice to see you."

"You are unfailingly polite, as always, Mr Nott," Dumbledore nods politely.

"What brings you to Rome?" Theo asks. Harry wants him to stop talking. He wants to use every ounce of magic in his body to send Theo flying through time and space to somewhere he is safe and away from Dumbledore, but Harry doesn't know those spells.

"Not the weather," Harry mutters. He carefully manoeuvres himself so that he is standing in front of Theo, blocking his eyes from Dumbledore's. Harry doesn't care that his shirt is open and Dumbledore can not only see his rune marks but the scars left by Bellatrix and Umbridge too, not as long as Theo is safe.

Safe, safe, I have to keep him safe, I will die if he's not safe -

"A simple thing, really, Mr Nott," Dumbledore says gently. "I have a letter to deliver to Harry from his father."

"From his ...?" Theo repeats.

"He means James," Harry says abruptly. After all, Dumbledore is the one who insisted Harry remain Harry Potter-Black in public. It's why he has to wear those godforsaken fucking glasses.

"Can you give us a minute, sir? We'll ... we'll join you out in the ..."

Harry waves his hand towards the public space. That's what they need right now. Witnesses. Dumbledore looks at them carefully and inclines his head, pulling out his wand and waving it towards Harry. Gold buttons appear on his shirt again.

"Of course," Dumbledore nods pleasantly. "Please do me the kindness of not disappearing, Harry."

Harry understands the implications: *because I will follow you.*

"You have my word," Harry says through gritted teeth. Dumbledore turns and leaves. They both wait, holding their breath until they hear the portrait creak open and the loud bustle of the muggles in the temple beyond. Then Theo rounds on Harry.

"Why did you do that? Why did you give him your word?" He hisses, silver eyes blazing.

"Because he's fucking *Dumbledore*," Harry snaps. "He could find me before we even found a back door out of here and I can't even apparate yet -,"

"Of course you can!" Theo explodes. "You move through space all the fucking time!"

"I move *accidentally*," Harry fumbles to do up his buttons, hands shaking worse than usual. "I've never done it intentionally, I don't even know how, I don't even know the incantation - fuck, can you help me with this?"

Harry throws up his hands, breathing heavily as Theo gently begins to button his shirt for him. There is a tense silence.

"What are we going to do?" Theo asks quietly.

"I'm going to go and have a probably very shit chat with a man who abandoned me," Harry says bleakly. "You are going to get the fuck out of here."

"If you think I'm leaving you then you're insane," Theo says and Harry tries not to wince, because, after everything in the last few weeks, he's pretty sure he might be. "We can use the portkey in your ring."

"Then he'll follow us," Harry says sharply. "He knows where I'd go."

Harry knows that leading Dumbledore to Spinner's End is a supremely bad idea. *The Mage Cage.*

"But Snape would be there," Theo hisses. "He can protect you."

"But *you'd* still be there," Harry presses. "I don't want you anywhere near him."

"I can defend myself," Theo snarls, doing Harry's top button up and tugging firmly on the collar of his shirt. Harry hears Theo's thoughts strumming through the bond: *let me defend you too.*

"Can you?" Harry demands, grabbing Theo's wrists as firmly as he can with his shaking hands. "Against Dumbledore?"

"I have occlumency," Theo says sharply. Harry decides that even through thick, ancient walls, this conversation is too dangerous to have in English.

“So?” Harry hisses, watching Theo’s eyes widen as the parseltongue drifts between them. *“He’s one of the best legilimens in the world, he slips into your thoughts, Theo, you don’t even notice he’s been there, it isn’t painful, it isn’t an assault, it’s a flicker of memories that you treasure, how can you defend your mind against an attack you don’t even know is there?”*

Theo grits his teeth and his grip on Harry’s collar tightens. Harry knows he’s fighting something, some instinct to do something, but Harry doesn’t quite understand what.

“How can *you*?” Theo grinds out. “How can you defend your mind?”

“I ... I have ... I’ve got ... my library,” Harry says lamely. He’s never fully explained to Theo how he drowns things, how he murders important stuff inside his mind regularly and how the not-caring is like a barrier, an invisible cloak of ice that stops him from feeling his sharpest thoughts.

“Besides, Dumbledore isn’t looking for secrets in *me*, Theo.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Theo says stubbornly.

Harry has had enough.

I will not let anyone else stand in front of a wand for me.

“You are,” he growls, hands gripping Theo’s neck in desperation, too overcome to stop the sparks in his fingers and the sheer agony in his chest. *I need to get him out of danger, I can’t do this if he’s in danger, I can’t survive this* - Harry slips back into parseltongue. *“Please, Theo, please, you have all of my secrets, you have my life and my secrets, I can’t do this if you’re vulnerable to him, I can’t stand it, please -,”*

“Okay, okay,” Theo cups Harry’s face, staring worriedly into his eyes. “Breathe.”

Harry tries to, but it’s like being on Mars. There’s no air to breathe. Theo clutches him close, just like he did in the woods by Nott castle. Harry’s being held so tightly that he shouldn’t be able to breathe but oddly, the pressure, the strength of it, makes everything easier. He lets out a long shuddering breath and flops his cheek against Theo’s shoulder, inhaling the ever comforting scent of him, of his sandalwood deodorant, of his fresh oceanic Heir magic and of his own magic, sweet and damp, like rain in the forest, which rises off of his skin.

He’s so perfect. I can’t let anything happen to him, ever.

“Please,” Harry hisses softly, feeling the sting of tears in his eyes. *Please let me keep you safe.*

“Alright,” Harry feels Theo swallowing. “I’ll go. When ... when it’s appropriate.”

Harry thinks that’s probably all he’s going to get. It doesn’t matter, because he has a backup plan. He closes his eyes and reaches deep inside himself to the place where Sahara speaks and his bonds sing. He finds Blaise, the consort-shield bond, orange, vivid, singing like waves crashing against the shore. Harry catches the dancing, yellow satin ribbon of it inside his mind and pulls, hard. *Come and take Theo to safety. Now.* It will have to be enough.

“Glamour yourself,” Harry says softly, voice croaking in English as he pulls away to look at Theo. He nods and rolls up his sleeve. Harry sees a small rune sequence painted in woad around his wrist. Theo sees him looking.

“It’s rune anchored,” Theo mutters. “A combination of runes and charms. It’s ... tricky.”

“So fucking smart,” Harry smiles. Theo shoots him a small grin and then presses his wand tip against the runes, muttering under his breath so they glow blue. Then he begins to trace the wand against the contours of his face, wincing slightly. Harry hopes it doesn’t hurt.

“*Ego non sum ego sum alius,*” Theo whispers, and his skin begins to stretch and change, just like it did with the Peverell potion, until his hair is shorter, the planes of his face wider, and Theo’s silver eyes are gazing at Harry out of a strange face. Harry nods and clicks his neck from side to side.

“Here we fucking go,” he murmurs.

“I love you,” Theo whispers.

Harry nods.

“You too,” Harry says curtly, catching the sorrow in Theo’s eyes and feeling his heart bleed. *I can’t think about that right now. I have to do what I have to do to keep him safe.* “Don’t look him in the eyes.”

Harry doesn’t wait for Theo to answer before marching along the passageway and out into the Pantheon. Dumbledore is standing in front of the statue of Agrippa, looking up at it benignly as the portrait closes behind Harry and Theo.

“You’ve got a letter from James?” Harry demands.

“I do,” Dumbledore nods pleasantly. It’s a quick moment, but Dumbledore catches Harry’s eye. *They are in Remus’ empty office after third year. “Prongs rode again last night.” Dumbledore’s tone is so soft, so comforting and Harry is absolutely sure there is no one else he can tell this to because Dumbledore is the person he trusts with his deepest secrets. “I thought it was my Dad ...” Dumbledore’s gentleness, he doesn’t dismiss him. “You did see your father last night, Harry. You found him within yourself.”*

Harry looks away, swallowing hard. He wants to cry. He wants the band on his wrist back so he can flick it, hard, better still, he wants to drop to his knees and scream and plunge his hands into the dusty ground and tunnel with magic so deep that millennia of ancient stone fall down on top of him.

Your magic is venomous, Greenheart. You must control it.

Isn’t that why you’re supposed to be here? Harry thinks back fiercely, averting his eyes from Dumbledore and struggling to speak.

You have a mate to help you, Greenheart.

He can feel the edges of Theo’s thoughts in the bond. *Let me help you.* Harry doesn’t want to, hates himself for doing this, but he knows he’s two seconds away from wrenching open the nothing-place and pushing Dumbledore in it, or burrowing to the centre of the earth with ice and dying inside the molten core. He bites his bottom lip, tasting blood, and links his fingers with Theo.

Circuit breaker, he thinks bleakly through the bond and knows Theo has heard it because he grips Harry’s hand tight. He hates it, but Harry lets Theo take some of the icy burn of the Black magic

out of his hand and clenches his right hand into a fist, despising when he can feel Theo flinching. Harry will do this to stop himself from doing worse things.

This is why I told him not to choose me, Harry thinks bleakly to himself.

Harry promptly drowns that thought. He will not pull his tether. He will not out Severus for all of Rome to see. He will stand here, in front of the man he once trusted to love and protect him more than anyone else in the world and bear it. He tips his chin up and looks at Dumbledore's face, determined not to meet his eye.

"So deliver it," Harry says coldly. *I don't care that I used to trust him. I don't care.* "We've got a date to get back to, thanks."

He hears Theo choke beside him. Harry pulls his hand away.

"Ah, that is where we need a little bit of help," Dumbledore says, in a slightly regretful tone. There is a crack and Griphook appears, scowling at Dumbledore and looking at Harry as if determined to check he is unharmed.

"You left without me," Griphook snarls, glaring at Dumbledore.

"Only for a moment," Dumbledore says, but Harry knows it was enough. *He wanted to remind me of what we've been through together.* Of the years where Dumbledore was his greatest confidante, the only person he could speak his deepest worries to. Not that any of it matters now. It stopped mattering as soon as Dumbledore dumped him in Privet Drive, alone with his grief.

"It is inappropriate," Griphook growls. He looks at Harry, his eyebrows drawing together when he looks at Theo, clearly unable to place him. *Good,* Harry thinks. "May your coffers overflow, Ward."

"May your enemies have the life sucked out of them by a hundred dementors," Harry says quickly, shooting Dumbledore a nasty glare. *If we're dancing down memory lane ...*

"Yes, I imagine that being particularly galling," Theo glares at Dumbledore. "For a thirteen-year-old."

"Harry has always been exceptional, Mr Nott," Dumbledore says easily, and Harry could growl, because now Griphook knows and Harry doesn't want *anyone* to know Theo is here. *I don't even want him to be here.*

"How can you be here?" Harry asks Griphook. "Like, out in public?"

"Goblin glamour," Griphook says shortly, and Harry suddenly wonders exactly how Griphook looks to a muggle. *Like a short, angry banker, probably.* "Now to the matter at hand, the Chief Warlock wanted to deliver this personally but of course, we do not let magical correspondence touch the hands of those it is not meant for, and since he would not wait until you returned -,"

"Time was of the essence," Dumbledore says smoothly, looking pointedly at Griphook. "Shall we proceed?"

"Shouldn't we do this somewhere more private?" Theo asks quietly, undeterred by Griphook's curious glance.

“We can create privacy,” Dumbledore says, pulling out his wand and gesturing it in a quick arc. Harry stares at it. He’s never really looked at Dumbledore’s wand before, why would he? Yet now he can’t stop looking at it. The odd runes around the base of it and the feeling that if he reaches out and touches it, something might happen. “We can begin.”

“Here you are, Ward,” Griphook says, handing over an envelope.

Harry stares at the handwriting on the envelope. It is not Severus' tight cursive nor Sirius' slanting scrawl. It is, however, painfully familiar. *Me and my son, 1990*. He looks up at Griphook.

“Why does he have to be here?” Harry gestures to Dumbledore, not caring if he sounds rude. He can sense Theo’s wild approval through the bond.

"I am a trustee of the Potter estate," Dumbledore says quietly. "It was entrusted to my care in 1990. Only to be delivered upon the occasion that the line of succession for the Potter Lordship -," Dumbledore's eyes drift to the bare space on Harry’s left hand. "Was disrupted."

“It is not disrupted if an Heir is named,” Griphook says shortly. “And the Potter Heir is under the protection of the Silver Hall, so do not make any suggestion she is not of the line.”

“Yeah, what Griphook said,” Harry mutters. He rips the envelope open. Theo leans in to read over his shoulder. Harry breathes in the scent of him for a second, (rain on a hot day, mead with stewed plums) and feels a little braver.

Hello son,

If you're receiving this letter, it's because you're having some trouble getting your Lordship ring. Hopefully, I have died at a ripe old age at home with you and your mum and all your brothers and sisters, but if I haven't, I'm very sorry! Will do better next time. It's hard to imagine since at this very moment, your six-month-old self is napping in the nursery and you've just thrown upon my last clean t-shirt.

Anyway, to the business at hand. Best be quick, since you'll probably be needing a feed soon. So it's always been a bit of a faff, the Potter Lordship ring. It's a finicky beast, as my old Dad used to say. If it's hiding from you (if it's not turned up on your finger or in Gringotts when it should have) it's because it's decided you need to prove yourself. It does this occasionally, apparently, since the time of Godric. For me, it disappeared for about three months until one day, right around after your Mum had told me about you coming along, it popped up on my finger! You can't predict it, apparently, but it'll show up when you need it. If you can, keep wearing your Heirship ring until it does, just for the comfort. The Potter magic can have a bit of a withdrawal if you suddenly don't have a conduit, watch out for that. The glowing can usually be masked with some glamours. If you have any questions, Griphook has been the Potter account manager since Merlin it seems, so ask away. Or you can ask Dumbledore, since I have no doubt Dumbledore will outlive us all. The Dumbledores and the Potters have always been close. He'll set you right. Or get Padfoot to fill you in. He knows as much about the Potters as any Potter on the planet. I'm sure you've grown into a very smart man, Harry, with some excellent people around you. I know you can handle it.

Love you always, little Prongs.

Your Dad,

James Charlus Fleamont Potter.

"That's it?" Harry stares at the letter. "What the fuck?"

"It's okay," Theo is rubbing his back soothingly, but Harry doesn't think anything will make this better. A letter from James. From his Dad. *Me and my son, 1990*. Harry was six months old. James had already blood adopted him, James must have known that Severus was his natural father, he and his Mum must have had a conversation about it, maybe a fight and yet ... *nothing*.

"It's not okay," Harry exclaims. "It's all rings and jokes and 'ask Padfoot' and he knew I wasn't - he knew and he doesn't even -!"

"Maybe they weren't going to tell you," Theo whispers. "He blood adopted you, he clearly thought of you as his own -,"

Harry shrugs Theo off and looks at Dumbledore.

"Why are you here?" he asks sharply. "You could have posted this."

"Or entrusted the Potter bank manager to deliver it, as I was intending to do so," Griphook snaps.

"Ever to the point, Harry," Dumbledore smiles, utterly ignoring Griphook, his eyes twinkling in the bright afternoon sunlight. "I hoped we might have a stroll and a chat if you are amenable."

"You knew that the Contessa wouldn't let you inside the Castello," Harry translates, looking at Dumbledore appraisingly. Griphook snorts and grins.

"She is certainly less hospitable as a hostess than she has been in years gone by," Dumbledore says.

"A sensible woman," Griphook cackles.

"If Ambassador Lupin and the Contessa are denying entrance then Harry shouldn't be engaging in any sort of discussions without them," Theo says bluntly. "He's still a minor."

"Well said, Lord Nott Apparent," Griphook says, giving Theo a satisfied look.

"I understand," Dumbledore inclines his head to Theo respectfully, which makes Harry inch slightly more in front of Theo. *Don't look at him, don't even think about it*. "However, it is the nature of Harry's minority which must be discussed, since I am the steward of the House of Black."

"For the moment," Griphook snarls, each word is bitten off and his teeth are bared.

"Heard about that, did you?" Harry looks at Dumbledore shrewdly. He knows what Severus would say. He knows what Theo wants. He knows what Remus would expect. *Run*. Harry doesn't feel like running today (and how do you outrun a super-wizard like Dumbledore? The man found *Grindlewald* for Christ's sake) and he doesn't think Dumbledore's come to pursue him. He's got a particular smile on his face that Harry recognises from the night of the rune circle and Skye. Dumbledore has a plan. "You've come to bargain."

Dumbledore inclines his head, smiling benignly. With the sun behind his white hair, he looks strangely and ironically angelic.

"Okay," Harry nods.

"No," Theo hisses, tugging his hand. Harry ignores him, ignores the strain in the bond that is desperate for his attention and keeps his eyes on Dumbledore.

"Lord Nott Apparent is correct, you should not bargain with the Chief Warlock without his Majesty present, the House of Black is under his personal jurisdiction," Griphook says.

"Well you're here, aren't you?" Harry says to Griphook.

"This conversation is better managed alone, Harry," Dumbledore says kindly. Griphook growls at him and folds his arms.

"I will remain," he looks at Harry significantly, "and stay nearby."

"Me too," Theo whispers, tugging Harry aside, a few steps away from Dumbledore and Griphook so they can't hear his words. "I will stay with you."

Harry doesn't answer. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees Blaise and Fred marching into the Pantheon, Blaise's eyes flashing red as he stalks across the marble floor. Harry allows himself to feel a flicker of relief. This will make everything so much easier, even if Theo's going to fucking hate him for it.

It's worth it if he's safe.

"No," Harry says softly, raising a hand to Blaise and feeling the heavy thrum of Blaise's vow between his shoulder blades. "You won't."

"Harry -," Theo is trying to grab his hand but Harry steps out of the way, ignoring the ache in the fidelity bond, as Blaise takes Theo's arm and pulls him aside.

"With me, consort," he mutters, too low for Dumbledore or Griphook to hear.

"Harry," Theo repeats urgently. Harry painfully ignores him.

"Send him and Daphne to safety," Harry says, his voice quietly hollow, because this fucking hurts. "Send a message to Remus at the Castello."

"Yes, my lord," Blaise nods firmly and pulls something out of his pocket. An elegant watch on a chain. He presses the button on the top and it glows.

"Look at me!" Theo hisses. Harry tries not to but he can't stop himself. Theo's silver eyes are filled with betrayal, just like when he found out about the consort-shield vow. *He never forgave me for it and he won't forgive me for this, either.* "He might be your consort-shield but you're *mine*."

Theo says the last word in crude parseltongue. Harry swallows back tears. He tries to drown the bond but he can't, he tries to pull up the not-caring to cover it, but it's impossible. It would be like trying to drown or cover his beating heart. He can't speak but he stares into Theo's eyes and speaks words through the bond, willing him to understand even though they are not touching and he's never really done this without touching: *that's why I'm doing it.*

Theo's eyes widen. Harry knows he's understood. Blaise nods and clicks the top of the pocket watch again, and the two of them disappear. Harry stares at the marble tiles and rubs his chest,

feeling the fidelity bond clench painfully inside him. He wants to call Theo back, he wants to have him in his arms, he wants to weep on him and fall asleep on him and roll over in the night engulfed in the scent of him but he can't, not if he wants to keep him safe, and that's all Harry wants. So this is all that matters. Harry sighs and closes his eyes. He opens the trapdoor in the library of his mind and flings down the secret books Dumbledore cannot find. *I'm a Mage. I met Death. I'm fidelity bonded to Theo. We are the House of Prince. I sometimes wish I had gone with Tom.* He hears them splash in the water of the lake and watches them drown. He slams the trap door shut, it echoes with a clang inside his mind and the not-caring seeps freely through him. One single absent thought crystallises: *We need to get better at having dates.* Then the coldness of the not-caring sweeps icily into his heart. When he knows it's done, he turns back around to look at Dumbledore.

"We're not alone," Harry says factually. He gestures to the man in the suit who has followed them into the Forum and is now in the Pantheon, pretending to read an information sign. "If you try to take me away, the Contessa will see it as an act of war or something like it."

"I have noticed that she is particularly covetous of you," Dumbledore says lightly. Harry tries not to be stung by it. The memory of Tom's voice from the cage echoes inside him: *I have seen your heart and it is mine.*

"She is not the only one," Griphook glares at Dumbledore. "His Majesty will not take Ward's abduction lightly."

"It is noted, Griphook," Dumbledore says. "Harry?"

Head down, no eye contact, rational thought. He doesn't want to bow his head in front of Dumbledore and shuffle like a child so instead, he fixes his gaze on an arch behind him.

"Shall we walk?" he asks calmly. Dumbledore inclines his head pleasantly and they walk side by side, Griphook following a few steps behind, around the Pantheon. For the briefest second, Harry feels so content, so safe, the way he always used to in Dumbledore's presence. Then he remembers.

"You are very unhappy with me, Harry," Dumbledore says quietly.

"Yes," Harry sees no reason to sugarcoat it. He hears Griphook snort behind. "You didn't want to rescue me."

"On the contrary, I wanted to very much," Dumbledore's voice is full of sorrow. "There were other considerations."

"I know that and I understand but it doesn't change what happened," Harry shrugs. He looks up at the great domed ceiling as they walk underneath it, falling into the shade.

"The Pantheon, coming from the Greek Pantheon, meaning 'common to all Gods,'" Dumbledore says quietly. "The human propensity towards worship has always amazed me."

Harry catches Griphook's eye and sees his account manager twisting his finger in a rolling motion. Harry understands. *Move it along, don't let him distract you.*

"I want Magnus to be the steward," Harry says abruptly, looking at the grey shadow created by the great dome of stone. "What do you want?"

"I see being a Slytherin has not made your negotiation skills any more refined," Dumbledore chuckles softly. "You are, as ever, direct."

"I'm not the one who changed," Harry says baldly, daring himself to at least look at Dumbledore's creased forehead. He can tell the sad expression that lingers there.

"We both know that is not true," Dumbledore says. *Cedric. Theo. Bellatrix. Arthur. Sirius. Nothing is the same anymore.* Harry shrugs and looks away.

"Some changes happened because they had to, because there was no other choice," Harry says tautly. Dumbledore nods sagely.

"I had wondered about your association with Mr Nott, given the rumours about you and Mr Zabini," Dumbledore says quietly. "Now I see how it came about."

"I'm not going to talk about that," Harry clenches his fists. The Black magic makes his hand glow and Griphook frowns.

"I understand the power of young love, but you must recognise the lack of wisdom in this connection," Dumbledore says softly.

Because he's so much better without me, Harry thinks bitterly and hears Griphook growling softly behind him.

"You understand? Really?" Harry says dully.

"Believe it or not, Harry, but I do remember the flush of star-crossed love. It allows me the perspective to tell you that these situations often bring despair."

Harry swallows a sudden wave of fury, so strong and violent he's surprised that the gold of his half of the fidelity bond doesn't flare up around him. *Mine!* A voice inside him screams. *You don't get to talk about this, you do not get to talk about Theo!* He tries to drown it and when that doesn't work, so he wrestles it back into quietness, breathing heavily until he thinks he can speak without screaming at Dumbledore.

"What do you want?" Harry repeats, very carefully not looking anywhere near Dumbledore. The sunlight dances across the maroon slabs of marble. "You've got your lessons and you've got me staying at Hogwarts and that keeps Severus safe. What do you want for the Black stewardship?"

Dumbledore raises his eyebrows at Harry using Severus' first name.

"*Fatherhood must be at the core of the universe,*" he quotes softly, staring at the wall. "C.S. Lewis was right."

Harry doesn't answer. That's a little bit too close to *you're a lynchpin in the universe, Harry,* for his liking.

"Answer Ward's question, Chief Warlock," Griphook's eyes are glittering dangerously. "What do you want?"

"I am not here to bargain with desires," Dumbledore sighs. "For what we desire we rarely gain. I am here to bargain for the lives of people known to you, people whom it is within your power and your power alone to save."

"Okay," Harry says cautiously. "Who?"

"Your mother's sister," Dumbledore says gently.

"Petunia?" Harry can't help it. He stares at Dumbledore for a brief second before glancing away. The blue eyes hold nothing but pity. Harry swallows. "What do you mean?"

"If you do not return to Petunia's home one time this summer, then Voldemort will be able to penetrate it and he will, undoubtedly, kill them," Dumbledore says.

"You want me to go back?" Harry shakes his head, laughing softly. "Jesus, why am I not surprised?"

"I hope that my attempt to protect people who were placed under my care long ago does not surprise you yet," Dumbledore smiles ruefully. "Your mother asked for Petunia's protection. After the night at Godric's Hollow, I saw a way forward to protect both you and her through your mother's sacrifice. As long as you reside in the home of Petunia Dursley, Voldemort cannot touch you there and nor, also, can he touch your blood relatives."

"Blood," Harry scorns quietly. "Right."

"Harry," Dumbledore's voice is insistent. "He will torture them and kill them."

"Good," Griphook snarls. Harry feels suddenly emboldened.

"Why would he bother?" Harry asks, folding his arms across his chest. "He knows I hate them."

"Perhaps then because he knows you hate them," Dumbledore's voice lowers even further, becoming heavy with regret. "You cannot conceal now how much he would like to control you, Harry. He would think it a gift, I imagine, in the hopes of manipulating you."

Harry thinks of his last birthday. *I can touch you now.*

"Let me get this straight," Harry says, trying not to let his voice shake. "They did what they did to me and you ... you want to send me back to them so Voldemort doesn't kill them?"

"I do," Dumbledore says gravely, "because no matter how vengeful you feel today, Harry, I know that you do not wish the burden of their deaths upon your head."

You don't know shit. As if to back up Harry's thoughts, Griphook snarls.

"None of Lord Gaunt's victims would be upon the head of Ward unless Ward specifically asked him," Griphook snaps.

"Oh, he knows that, he knew I wouldn't ever go back there again if I had a choice," Harry laughs lightly, running a hand through his hair before looking up at Dumbledore. "Of course you did. That's why you're here. This is the cost of Magnus being the Black steward, right? Me, going back to the Dursleys?"

"I do not think of it as such," Dumbledore says. "I want to respect your wishes about the estate of the House of Black -,"

"That does not seem likely, or else this could be a conversation that waited until Ward returned to London," Griphook interrupted, but Dumbledore does not seem to care.

"- But I also cannot see you lose your most valued protection, your home -,"

"My home?" Harry snarls, whipping his head to glare at Dumbledore, unable to stop the parseltongue. *"My home?"*

Dumbledore stiffens and Harry quickly looks down at his feet, breathing heavily.

"Do you require some help in returning to the common tongue?" Dumbledore asks gently, after a second has passed, slowly pulling out his wand. Griphook snarls and steps closer.

"You will not raise a wand to Ward," he growls.

"Only if Harry asks for it," Dumbledore is unperturbed. Harry swallows hard and breathes very deeply. In his mind, he sees Severus' finger gesturing the movement as he breathes in ... and out.

"No," Harry chokes out. "Just ... don't say that."

"It was perhaps a poor choice of words," Dumbledore says, putting his wand away. Harry tries to stop his eyes from following it. He feels suddenly very tired. *I'm tired of fighting him. I'm tired of fighting Tom. I'm tired of stopping myself from turning this magic inwards and burning me alive. I'm so fucking tired.*

"You think?" Harry says dully. "How long?"

"How long what, Harry?" Dumbledore asks gently.

"How long do I need to go back for in order for ... *them* to be safe?" Harry can't help the harshness of his voice. "And for you to give me what I fucking want and give up the Black stewardship to Magnus?"

"Ward, this is certainly something that his Majesty should be consulted about," Griphook says in a warning voice.

"I'm not dragging it out, I'm not waiting for a second longer to deal with this," Harry says, thinking, *because any second too long and I will literally explode this building like a star*. He then glares at Dumbledore. "How long?"

"It's not a matter of time -," Dumbledore begins.

"Yes, it is," Harry snaps. "How long?"

Dumbledore stares at him for a long moment but Harry cannot look in his face. If he does, he knows Dumbledore will see just how much Harry wants to slap him. Griphook seems to be having the same problem, fingers twitching by his side, and Harry wonders if all Gringotts Account managers have axes. He remembers the way Griphook used his magic to completely transform the floor of Grimmauld Place. *I'd like to see that again. I wonder if Bill can teach me to do that.*

"Two weeks," Dumbledore says.

"No," Harry shakes his head. In his mind, he sees Vernon's face before his fist collided with Harry's face. *Not again.*

"A week then."

Harry gives Dumbledore a sideways glance. Griphook is watching Harry carefully and he thinks about what a goblin would do. *All the facts first, don't lie or try to cheat a goblin, not if you want to live.*

"If you want me to anything, you need to be honest with me," Harry tries to keep his voice level. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Griphook nod approvingly. "You know what they did to me, you know what ... what happened."

Harry swallows hard. He wishes he could launch every terrible thing Vernon and Petunia ever did to him at Dumbledore, spit them out at Dumbledore, yell them furiously for the old stones around them to witness, but every single word sticks in his mouth. He can't say it.

"If you want me to go back, if it's really important to you, then you need to tell me precisely how long I have to stay in that goddamned hell-hole of a house for the protection to be complete and not a minute longer," Harry says. "Be specific otherwise I will never trust you again."

Though I may never trust you again anyway. Harry is too irritated to stop himself from staring furiously into Dumbledore's eyes and he sees, in a flash of blue, that Dumbledore has seen his thought. Suddenly, Harry remembers Dumbledore sitting behind his desk after the third task: ' *You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight.* ' *Harry feels the relief of being recognised, of rising to the occasion and gratitude to Dumbledore for seeing what it has cost him.*

Harry blinks and looks away, feeling fury rising to replace it. He can't help the hiss that escapes him and he flexes his hand, a Black shield erecting between him and Dumbledore. Griphook instantly clicks his fingers and a strange pulse of invisible energy wafts away from him, like a stiff breeze. Harry notices that all the Muggles around them pointedly look away, a blankness covering their faces. Meanwhile, the Wixen whom the Contessa has sent to guard him have their wands out. One has his back to Harry, pointed outwards, as if to stop anyone coming, swirling in slow motion to create a red lines in the air. The other has her wand pointed at Dumbledore. Harry and Dumbledore are standing, Harry realises, in the centre of a perfect circle, Harry's shield is between them, the magic of the Contessa's guard zipping in concentric circles around them. He realises, suddenly, that he's done something very stupid and very public.

Well, Harry thinks, *no going back now.*

"Ah," Dumbledore whispers. "We seem to have drawn attention to ourselves. It is a good thing we are so protected."

"Not enough, clearly," Harry says. The Black Magic pulses with furious white light. "It's not polite to play with people's memories, sir."

Griphook growls and whips out a knife. *Not an axe then.*

"The Chief Warlock will rue the day if he assaults His Majesty's Ward," Griphook says quietly, rolling the knife along his long fingers.

"I would never hurt you, Harry," Dumbledore looks chagrined. Harry tries to resist the urge to open the nothing-place with his Prince ring and see what happens if he throws Dumbledore into it. He doesn't lower his shield.

"Ironic, considering you're sending me back to people who did nothing but hurt me," Harry says quietly. "So just tell me, specifically, how long."

Dumbledore stands quietly for a moment. The only sound is the slight whirr of the red magic, zapping in lines around them. Harry thinks it's to contain whatever magic might happen between them and Harry suddenly feels ready. *Try something, please, hurt me this way, because it will still be better than going back to Privet Drive.* Dumbledore, however, does not draw his wand and Harry is disappointed. From the rueful look in Dumbledore's eye and the way he keeps looking at Harry's eyes as if expecting to see red there, Harry thinks Dumbledore knows it.

That's why he's not making a fuss, Harry realises. It's why Dumbledore has allowed the Contessa's aides to contain them. *He thinks he might have to fight Tom inside me and he doesn't want to hurt anyone.*

Fucking bastard, Harry feels a flash of furious, familiar liquid hate. *Fucking know-it-all bastard.*

He's always been so presumptuous, Tom's voice whispers in his mind.

Not you too, you fucker, Harry snarls internally, wrenching up the not-caring to cover his mind with ice. He's suddenly cold and very glad. *Dumbledore thinks I'm Tom. Tom thinks he can tease me about Dumbledore. I do not fucking care about either of them.*

"Tell the truth, Professor," Harry says sharply, and notices Dumbledore's eyebrows furrow but doesn't care. *I don't care about anything.*

"I cannot be as specific as you wish, Harry," Dumbledore says quietly. "The longer you spend there, the stronger the protection will be. In order for it to hold for a full year, I anticipate the total amount of time being ninety-eight hours and thirty-five minutes."

"Which is ... ?"

"Four days," Griphook says, "and two hours and thirty five minutes."

Vernon can do a lot of damage in thirty-five minutes, let alone two hours and four days.

"Really?" Harry can't stop his voice from sounding plaintive.

"Yes," Dumbledore says softly. Harry can feel the regret in those blue eyes, even if he's not looking into them. It only makes it worse. "That is as specific as I can be, but it may be wise to assume five days."

Griphook growls. Harry feels the same.

"No, we can assume four days, two hours and thirty-five minutes," Harry says. He will not do a whole extra day just because of some vague notion of safety. "If I'm going to do this, we need some way of measuring it. The protection. So the moment it's ready, I can go."

"We shall provide a device," Griphook says shortly. "When it is sufficient, you shall know."

"As I say, Harry, the longer you stay, the greater the strength will be -," Dumbledore starts. Harry cuts him off.

"I don't care if it's strong, I care if it's sufficient," Harry snaps. "When it's sufficient, I'm gone."

Dumbledore looks at him for a long moment. Harry feels his left hand trembling with the shield, almost feeling as if there are wings at his back, longing to break through and fly him away but he doesn't. He simply stares at his old mentor's beard. *I loved you. Part of me still loves you. If you love me at all, you won't make this harder.*

"There is power in forgiveness, Harry," Dumbledore says quietly. "Not for their sake, but for your own."

Harry squeezes his left hand tight, feeling the sharp wound tingle across his palm. The shield around him and Griphook pulses with white light that makes the sparkle in the marble around their feet rise up like water.

The sparkling shards of gemstones ripple around them and Griphook stares at them in fascination and recognition. He's chanting under his breath, low and melodious even though Harry can't make out the words, but suddenly, the shards brought out of the marble by the Black Prince are reformed to be a circle of glittering spikes out of the earth, grinding together under the pass of Griphook's hand. Harry remembers the Goblin King's words about goblins fighting with songs. Maybe this is it. Beyond it, the red, zipping lines of the watcher's magic fizzles in response.

Harry looks down at the Black ring and imagines the Black Prince inside his mind.

You're a bit like a goblin, aren't you? Loyal to shiny things.

Loyal to you, a voice whispers. Loyal to justice.

Harry remembers Tom's question when he possessed him: *What would be justice, Harry?*

What in-fucking-deed.

Harry looks up at Dumbledore's shoulder, noticing the way Dumbledore is looking curiously around him as if a bunch of roses has erupted. Harry finds his voice again.

"Four days and two hours and thirty-five minutes and I'm not going alone," Harry says as levelly as he possibly can.

"It is more than reasonable," Griphook says. He's standing at Harry's elbow now as if he's preparing to put a hand on Harry and throw him behind himself. "Name any further terms, Chief Warlock."

"Thank you, Griphook," Dumbledore says softly before looking at Harry. "You cannot take Mr Nott. Death Eaters have begun to watch Privet Drive since they know you are no longer there. He would be seen."

"Fine," Harry says. He doesn't even look at Griphook. He trusts that if Griphook has worked out Harry's going out with Theo, he'll never share that secret with anyone.

"Lord Nott Apparent, *Mr Dumbledore*," Griphook corrects snarkily, and Harry actually loves his bank manager for a moment. Dumbledore just smiles merrily, which makes Griphook growl even

deeper.

"And I am afraid for the same reasons it cannot be Professor Snape. Nor can it be Remus," Dumbledore says.

"Why not?" Harry swallows hard. Remus was going to be his first choice. All he'd have to do is drop his lycanthropy into the conversation as soon as they crossed the threshold and Vernon would stay well away.

"Werewolves are not permitted to stay inside muggle dwellings," Griphook grunts. "Due to the horrendous laws passed by the Wizengamot discriminating against Creatures."

"Sadly, unmaking a law is much easier than making it," Dumbledore smiles ruefully.

"I doubt you would think or say so if the prejudice was directed at you, Chief Warlock," Griphook snaps. Dumbledore only inclines his head.

"I would also counsel you against a Wixen friend who might be followed, like your Mr Zabini," Dumbledore says.

"Hermione," Harry says sharply before Dumbledore discounts everyone he knows. "It's going to be Hermione. She was brought up muggle, like me, she knows how to handle them. They'll be less aggressive with a girl."

Dumbledore looks pained for a moment but then he nods.

"Miss Granger would be a fine choice," Dumbledore says.

"The Goblin nation will protect the Ward of the Silver Hall if Heir Potter shall be in an unsafe environment," Griphook says. "We will make provisions."

That makes Harry feel a little better. He dares himself to look up at Dumbledore's bushy eyebrows.

"So for four days and two hours and thirty five minutes in Privet Drive with Hermione this summer, I get Magnus?" Harry presses.

"Yes," Dumbledore nods. "But it must be before your birthday."

"You did not name that in the terms," Griphook snaps.

"I name it now," Dumbledore says calmly. "It must be before the 31st of July."

Harry stares at him. That means it must be this coming week. *Holy shit, next week I'm going to be back in Privet Drive.* Harry feels like there have been lots of things he could panic about recently, but this is one of the most justified. *Holy fucking fuck, what the fuck am I going to do?* Yet if he does this, he gets Magnus back in his life and Dumbledore out of it and as far away from the secrets of the Black Magic as possible. Secrets like the veil, the Black Prince and Sirius' obscurus. If bargaining is the only way to deal with Dumbledore, it's better to take away one of his biggest chips. *Whatever the cost.*

"Fine," Harry nods jerkily. *Severus and Remus are going to kill me.* "We ..."

He looks at Griphook for the correct words. Griphook looks like he doesn't want to give them.

"We accept the terms given," Griphook says stiffly. Harry nods.

"We accept the terms given," Harry repeats.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore nods softly. "You are, as ever, courageous beyond measure."

"This needs more than my courage," Harry says. He brings his hand down and the Black shield vanishes. He holds out a hand to Dumbledore.

"You require a handshake?" Dumbledore's eyes twinkle down at Harry. "I see Remus has taught you something of how to bear your Lordship."

"Not a handshake," Harry shakes his head and tries not to let his left hand tremble. It is a losing battle. "I need a vow."

"Careful, Ward," Griphook is still holding his knife out. "Wixen are known for unfair vows and a vow made with Magic is binding. Goblins prefer paper and blood."

"We'll do paper and blood too but right now I'm doing this," Harry looks back at Dumbledore. He takes a millisecond inside his mind and drowns everything. He tumbles the library into the lake and brings mountains down on top of it. He waits until all he feels inside is the icy chill of water which has swallowed all life.

I don't care. Everything is gone, everything is dead, and there is nothing left to feel.

Then, when he's totally sure, he looks into Dumbledore's eyes. They are blue and Harry feels nothing and he knows it has worked, just like it did with Sirius in the shack. "I'll vow to go back to the Dursleys for as long as it takes to sufficiently recharge the protection if you vow that you'll let go of the Black Stewardship without issue."

"Those are the terms we have agreed," Dumbledore nods gently, extending his hand.

"I also need you to promise I never have to go back after this," Harry says coldly.

A lake inside my mind, so still and cold it freezes the leaves on the trees.

When Harry speaks, his breath is frozen, misting in the warm, Italian air. If Dumbledore notices, he doesn't show it. He just steps a little closer.

"Harry, this recharge of protection only lasts for twelve months -," he says softly.

Water so cold and deep that nothing lives in it, there is nothing to find, nothing to feel.

"In twelve months I'll be turning seventeen," Harry says abruptly. His extended hand won't stop shaking and he thinks there could be ice under his fingernails but he doesn't care.

There's nothing in my mind for him to see. An empty lake at the end of the world.

"I'll be a legal adult and I will be done with them. If I survive, which I probably won't, so it doesn't matter."

Harry does not even try to sound like he cares. He swears he sees something like pity and victory in Dumbledore's eyes, just like he did when he learned Voldemort had taken Harry's blood protection,

but then it's gone a moment later and he only looks tired.

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore says softly. "I promise that this will be the last time."

"Then we have a deal," Harry nods. He takes Dumbledore's hand. He feels the man's warm hands against his icy skin and sees Dumbledore's eyebrows raise an inch. He does not care.

Drowned secrets, drowned so deep they vanish into ice and nothingness.

"I promise to go back."

"I promise to renege my claim on the Black Stewardship and that you shall never be compelled to return there after this final time," Dumbledore says.

"Ever again," Harry prompts. "Swear it on your magic."

Dumbledore pauses. He looks into Harry's eyes. Harry waits. He feels the burning lance of Dumbledore's legilimency trying to sear into his mind, but it freezes on entry. He feels the distant warmth of a memory trying to live inside that frozen wasteland inside his mind, the lemon-scented flicker of Dumbledore's magic trying to burn it into life, but nothing burns inside there. Harry waits for Dumbledore to withdraw. He does and it burns like a fucker on exit too and Harry knows he's going to have a monster headache but right now Harry doesn't care.

Ice and darkness and snow that never moves. Nothing lives, nothing hopes, nothing dreams.

He raises an eyebrow and waits.

"I see Occlumency lessons progress apace," Dumbledore smiles softly.

"I always have been exceptional," Harry repeats, deadpan. "So?"

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore squeezes his hand tightly as if trying to squeeze some warmth back into him but Harry can't feel his fingers.

Frozen, frozen, so deep and so cold.

"Upon my magic, I swear that after this last time. You shall never have to return to your relatives ever again."

Inside Harry's being, the victorious caw of the raven sounds. He sees Sirius the Obscurus, small and broken, trapped forever in the place he was hurt. He sees Sirius the man, trapped in Grimmauld Place, tearing himself apart. He sees his own cupboard, the bars on his bedroom windows, and the cat flap on the door.

Never again, Harry thinks.

Justice, scream the million voices of the Black Magic.

Magic flares between them, bright white light from the Black ring and something sunny and yellow from an ancient ring on Dumbledore's hand. Dumbledore's bushy eyebrows raise but he does not look surprised.

“So it said, so it is heard, so it shall be,” Griphook says. He holds his knife up to Harry and Harry remembers how Goblins swear on blood and paper. Harry nods again. He quickly slashes the knife across the creases of Dumbledore’s and Harry’s thumbs, where the skin meets. Blood wells up and mingles with Harry’s and before Harry can think that this might trigger his blood magic, he’s tasting it inside himself and can’t stop it. Harry tastes Dumbledore’s magic for a roaring second. lemony and buttery, like tart or sweets. Underneath, though, there is something sharper, harsher than he expected. Like lemon, but with more tang. Yuzu or grapefruit, the bitterness of it almost curling Harry’s tongue. Something hard and stringent hiding under sweetness, and more than that, *power*. The Dumbledore magic is a thousand yellow bees, swarming and buzzing, threatening and flying and Harry feels it, the power in it that is not sweet at all. It is without thought, it is hungry, it is searching, it is busy, it is fiercely, wildly protective of something deep inside that Harry cannot taste. *More power*, Harry thinks, and it makes sense suddenly, that one of the most powerful people he knows would use so much of his energy protecting the hives of sheer power he has cloistered away inside. It stings his tongue to taste.

Pretty cunning for the most famous Gryffindor around, Harry thinks.

They pull their hands apart and Harry quickly takes the cloth that Griphook offers him, happy to get Dumbledore’s blood off his hand, hoping that the taste of it will reduce because his tongue is starting to hurt. Dumbledore looks at his hand with mild amusement, clenching and unclenching it as the white light settles into his skin. Harry remembers with sudden fear that Dumbledore is known for sensing magic, as Bill told him long ago. He wonders what Dumbledore senses in the Black Magic.

That we look for justice and not power, honoured Mage, the voice of the Black Prince whispers into Harry’s mind. Harry hopes he’s right.

“Well then,” Harry coughs. His voice is shaking and his throat is still cold. He will not risk looking into Dumbledore’s eyes again. He can’t stay frozen this long. It hurts too much. “We’re done here.”

“Ward is finished, yes,” Griphook takes the blood-stained rag back from him and sets it aflame with a click of his long fingers. His eyes are full of calculating curiosity but also, Harry thinks, ferocious excitement. “*Uzbadgabil*, Ward.”

“Yeah, heard that one before,” Harry mutters. “See you then, Professor.”

“I look forward to our lessons this term,” Dumbledore’s voice is quiet. His eyes fix on Harry’s face and Harry stares at his ear. “I think we have a lot to talk about.”

“Lord Potter-Black.”

Harry turns towards the sound of a familiar voice in surprise. The Contessa is standing in the middle of the Forum, a few feet away from them. She is dressed very convincingly in muggle clothes, a smart, tightly fitted red dress and a pair of fashionable boots that Harry thinks might be dragon hide. Her hair is slicked back today in a severe but beautiful arrangement with gold bands. She has crossed the red, zipping lines of magic and Blaise, Hermione and Fred stand behind her. Harry is utterly, crushingly relieved that Theo isn’t with them. He catches Blaise’s eye and he nods. Harry feels a tingle in his shoulders and knows his consort is safe. Over the Contessa’s shoulder, Harry can see a lot of people staring at them and wonders if it’s because of Dumbledore’s stupid outfit, but then he remembers muggles can’t see them right now, thanks to Griphook, so the people

staring must be Wixen. Wixen who have no doubt just watched his massive display of power. *Oh, shit.* Harry looks guiltily at the Contessa but her red eyes are fixed on Dumbledore.

"Hello," Harry says. He catches Hermione's eye. She is staring at Harry's bloodstained hand in horror. "Where's Remus?"

"Ambassador Lupin is in session in Venice this afternoon," the Contessa says quietly, never taking her eyes off Dumbledore. "I have come in his stead."

"He is most honoured," Dumbledore inclines his head respectfully. The Contessa's eyes fix upon Harry.

"Would you join me, Heir Potter-Black?" she says courteously, gesturing to her side. Harry nods and steps over next to her, Griphook following, who bows before the Contessa.

"Now Ward is under your care once more, Honourable Contessa, I have a report to make to His Majesty," Griphook says. He looks at Harry. "May your enemies be vanquished, Ward."

"May yours have microwaves dropped on them from a great height," Harry winces as Griphook raises his eyebrows. "Sorry, I'm tired, but I promise, it's a good one."

"I shall trust you, Ward, as I see my King has been right to do so," Griphook says softly. He looks at Fred over Harry's shoulder. "Guard your Lord."

"Always," Fred says easily, and Griphook nods and cracks away. Fred moves to stand behind Harry, his hand resting on his shoulder. Harry smells fennel and feels a cold burn in the Black ring. *Protection.* He breathes a little easier. He's even more surprised when he feels a slim hand rest on his other shoulder. Harry stares up at the Contessa but she does not stop staring at Dumbledore. The ring on her finger feels heavy with power. It thrums through him for a moment and Harry tastes oregano and blood; the taste of her vow to him. *I shall ensure you live.*

"We had no idea, Chief Warlock, that we were expecting you in our fair city today," she says.

"A little sight seeing only," Dumbledore says breezily, even as he pulls out a paisley patterned handkerchief and presses it to his hand. "I would not impose upon what is yours, Contessa."

"Ah, but what is Roma if not mine?" the Contessa says quietly. "What is Venezia and Sicilia? What are her citizens if not under my care?"

"I do not stake a claim, *Donas de fuera*," Dumbledore says.

"Do not - ," Blaise steps forward behind his mother, and Harry gets the sense that Dumbledore has said something very personal. He immediately tugs on his consort-shield bond, feeling the weight of it in his shoulders and Blaise stops. He glares at Harry but steps back beside Fred.

"I too guard a nation," Dumbledore's eyes flicker to Harry and he smiles fondly. "And those who grow inside it."

"In Italy, those we guard do not take first blood," the Contessa smiles at Dumbledore, her eyes flickering to his bloody handkerchief. It is not a pleasant smile. "But then we did always play chess differently, Albus."

"So we did, Vicencia," Dumbledore inclines his head gently. It takes Harry a moment to realise this must be the Contessa's first name.

"You shall not have my Contessa's name, *Professore*," Blaise snarls. Harry sees that his Heir ring is glowing.

"Peace," the Contessa says, holding up her hand to stop her son from advancing. Still, she has not let go of Harry's shoulder. "Gifts of names given in times of friendship cannot be revoked, no matter how the winds change. Learn well, my son."

"Are we so far from where we once were? You have always been a great teacher, Vicencia, like all those who came before you," Dumbledore says softly.

"You are a great teacher too, Albus. Your words once set all of Europe afire, did they not?" the Contessa says quietly.

"It was a wise man who said 'Judge a man not by his words, but by his deeds.'" Dumbeldore says.

"Another man said "*Für das Größere Wohl*," the Contessa's voice is suddenly dark. "For the Greater Good, Albus."

Harry doesn't understand this, but Dumbledore's blue eyes are suddenly sharper, his jaw tighter. Harry isn't sure, but he feels pretty convinced that whatever game they were playing, the Contessa has won this round. Harry is reminded of Bill. *Uzbadgabil*. Is this what it looks like when two great leaders battle? Dumbledore looks at Harry intently.

"You may contact me, Harry, if you have any questions," he looks pointedly down at the letter in Harry's hand right hand. *About James*. "Now, please excuse me. I have a meeting at the Vatican."

"Send my warmest regards," the Contessa says quietly. Dumbledore nods and strides away, looking happily at the ruins. The wixen who have gathered part like water to let him pass and then, as soon as he has moved, they begin to whisper and stare at Harry and he sees the flash of a camera.

"Paparazzi," Blaise says quietly. The Contessa gestures to the lady who had her wand pointed at Dumbledore and she walks toward the wizard with the camera.

"Excuse me, we must take care of this," the Contessa says, moving towards her guards, her son walking at her side towards other wixen who are also pulling out cameras. Harry feels exhausted. What will they print in the newspapers about him and Dumbledore now? Was the 'Chosen One' not good enough? He sways slightly and feels Fred gripping his shoulder very firmly.

"Easy there, milord," Fred says quietly.

"I told you not to call me that," Harry mutters.

"Too bad, milord," Fred says cheerfully.

"Oh Harry, what did you do?" Hermione whispers, her brown eyes swimming with tears.

"I traded," Harry mumbles. "We get Magnus as the Black Steward and I have to go back to Privet Drive."

“WHAT?” It might have been Hermione, it might have been Fred, but their exclamation makes Harry wince. It’s only a small measure of how it is going to be with Remus. And Severus. *Oh, shitting hell Severus is going to be a fucking nightmare.*

“ Please, don’t fucking shout at me,” Harry says wearily.

“Harry, you can’t -,” Hermione is suddenly on his other side, grabbing his right hand tightly, eyes full of worry.

“That’s insane,” Fred says fiercely, pitching his voice low. “You’re not going alone, George and I will take you.”

Harry nods tiredly, too exhausted to protest and looks up at Hermione.

“I said you’d go with me,” Harry mumbles. “I’m sorry, I should have asked -,”

“Of course I will,” Hermione whispers. “Is this a good idea, though, Harry?”

“Probably not,” Harry snorts sarcastically. “But it’s what we’re doing and we’re doing it secretly.”

“You’re not telling Nott?” Fred asks, his eyes narrowed. Harry shakes his head. If he imagines that Severus will take this news badly, it is only the merest fraction of how dreadfully, appallingly badly Theo will take it. *I won’t put him through that.* Harry will not put Theo in the path of any of the Dursleys ever again.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione whispers. “That is a really bad idea.”

“It’s what we’re doing,” Harry says tersely. “He’s already pissed that I sent him away.”

What does one more betrayal matter when I’ve already betrayed him?

“So you’re going to make him *more* pissed?” Fred whispers. “The kid with the fucking *knife*?”

“I’m protecting him,” Harry says flatly. *From me.* “Which means I’m not telling him and you’re not telling Daphne -,” Harry points at Hermione and then points to Fred, “-and you’re not telling Blaise.”

“Everyone saw you take a vow,” Fred says, gesturing around. “He’s going to see it too. He’s going to ask, they’re all going to ask.”

“Blaise and Daphne won’t if I tell them not to,” Harry says stubbornly. “Vows.”

“You can’t use your vows to control people,” Hermione whispers.

“Yes I can,” Harry shrugs, not caring when her eyes widen in shock.

“Mate, Hermione’s right, this is a supremely terrible idea,” Fred shakes his head. “What’s going to happen when he finds out you were there afterwards?”

Then I’ll deal with it, Harry thinks bleakly. *If I even survive the Dursleys.*

“I don’t care,” Harry says, feeling the ice around his heart breaking. “Because he’ll be safe.”

Fred and Hermione stare at each other, clearly lost for words. Then Hermione looks at him, taking his hand gently.

“Harry,” she whispers. “You love him.”

Her words are enough. The cracks begin across his icy mindscape, across his frozen body. Harry takes a shuddering breath and rubs his chest. *I love him, I do love him so fucking much, like I'm going to bleed to death with it, more than I loved Sirius even.* But Sirius is dead and a part of Harry is constantly howling because of it. He won't survive Theo being hurt. No one will. He tries to breathe as deeply as he can manage, imagining Severus' voice. *In ... and out.*

“I do love him,” Harry whispers. “That's why I'm doing it.”

Harry thinks of his mother. He thinks of James Potter. He thinks of Sirius, standing in front of Bellatrix's wand. If there's one thing Harry knows about love it's that it involves sacrifice, sometimes the biggest sacrifice, to protect the person you love.

Even if you don't want them to, Harry thinks bleakly, *after all, I didn't want anyone to die for me.*

“You need to go, my Lord,” Blaise says, walking quickly over to them, looking as harassed as someone like Blaise possibly can, a slight flush high on his cheekbones. Over his shoulder, Harry can see more wixen and more cameras pouring into the pantheon. There is no way out. “Quickly.”

"Okay," Harry says quietly. He's fatigued suddenly and thinks longingly of his bedroom, of the soft duvet and of Kreacher's little nook under the eaves and Hedwig flying off through the round window. The bed might not have Theo in it anymore but it's better than nothing and maybe the blankets will still smell like him. If Harry can't have Theo, if Harry has to push Theo away to keep him safe, then he'll at least have things that smell like Theo. He looks at Hermione. "Tell Remus I've gone home."

She nods and hands him his rubber band, helping him slip it back onto his left wrist.

“Use it,” she whispers as she pulls him into a hug. “Use everything. It's okay to feel it, Harry.”

Harry doesn't think it is.

He steps away from them all and turns his back on them, hiding his right hand where he reaches for the Prince ring, pressing his hand against it and thinking of Severus. He hopes he's where he thinks he is. With a tug around his stomach, he jerks through time and space and knocks his knees into something firm. He stumbles against Severus' workbench in the basement of Spinners End. Severus is staring at him, sleeves rolled up, dark mark on display, his long hair pulled back and his hands covered in some kind of white dust so that, absurdly, Harry thinks he is baking bread. He is clearly in the midst of brewing.

"Hello," Harry says wearily.

"Hello," Severus says, staring at the Prince ring on Harry's hand. His eyes are full of questions but Harry's too sad, lonely and downright fed up to answer them.

"I'm going to bed," Harry sighs, and he turns and climbs the stairs out of the basement.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Return to Spinner's End

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/child abuse)

This time, Severus learns and shares secrets.
Next time, Remus is home!

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

What the fuck?

Severus stares at his child as he climbs the stairs out of the cellar, his mind struggling to catch up. He is covered in powdered hydra fang and his latest brew of Wolfsbane is in its critical stage. Nevertheless, he dusts off his hands as best he can and sets the potion in stasis. He conjures a Patronus for Lupin and sends it on its way with the words: "He is with me." Then he follows his child upstairs. By the time Severus has pushed open the doorway to the attic room, Harrison is a mound underneath a duvet.

"Harrison," Severus says.

"Go away," a muffled voice emerges.

Severus simply stares at him. He has not seen the child in the flesh in two weeks. In that time, Severus has been tortured nearly into an early grave at the Dark Lord's hand for his failure to produce a potion that would render Lestrage able to walk again and has felt the absence of his child and his lover keenly. Especially since Harrison's edges have been terrible and Severus has been spending far too much time in muggle London purchasing books about managing self-harm in adolescents. Severus has struggled to sleep at night, lying awake wondering if Harrison is waking up if he is fighting the urge and more terrifyingly, his magic, to hurt himself. Severus has been carrying the ache of his son's absence every fucking second of the day and night and has been preparing himself for his inevitable but unfortunate conversation with Lupin and then, in all likelihood also Harrison, about his child's disturbing connection to the Dark Lord's mind. Yet now here Harrison is, without preamble, with no warning, buried under a duvet in such a teenage display of surliness that Severus feels compelled to look over his shoulder, just to check that the universe is indeed still turning. That he has not stumbled into an alternate dimension where he has an ordinary child in an ordinary life rather than a terrifying whirlwind of magic and hormones.

"Why are you not in Rome?" Severus asks, stepping into the room.

"Finished exams," comes the mumbling reply, as if that is enough of an explanation. Severus sighs and attempts to pull the duvet back but Harrison obviously has it in a tight grip and rolls over, cocooning himself. *Merlin, save me from whatever this is.* It could be anything from a fight with Theodore (Severus prays it is not that, because he would have no idea how to proceed) to Harrison accidentally breaking the laws of nature again. Severus decides to start with the things he can most easily converse in.

"Is anyone dead?" Severus asks flatly. "Did you kill someone?"

"No!" An angry face appears, popping up out of the duvet, curls wild and eyes fiery. "Jesus!"

"Then why are you not in Rome?" Severus repeats, shooting a hand out to grab the edge of the duvet, preventing Harrison from whipping it back over his head. Harrison sets his jaw and tugs but it does no good. Severus simply holds on and stares at him with a raised eyebrow. Finally, Harrison huffs and slumps back against the headboard, folding his arms in irritation.

"I did something," Harrison mumbles. "You're gonna hate it."

Severus closes his eyes briefly. It could be all manner of things. *Proposed to Nott. Adopted a Weasley as well as a Granger. Acquired another reptile. Hurt himself again. Had the word 'Padfoot' tattooed across his stomach?* Then there are the worst things. *Did he share secrets with the Dark Lord? Did the Dark Lord convince him to do something violent and awful, just as he once convinced me?* Severus opens his eyes.

"In that case, may I sit?" Severus says slowly, gesturing to the bed. Harrison scowls but shuffles over slightly, and Severus sits on the edge of the mattress, looking expectantly at his son. "Speak."

"It's a good news/bad news situation," Harrison mumbles, staring down at the tartan pattern on the duvet cover.

"The bad news first," Severus demands and Harrison winces as if he had hoped to sweeten the bitterness of this information.

"I'm going back to the Dursleys next week, for four days and four hours, or however long it takes to charge up the protection in Mum's blood between me and Petunia, and you can't come with me because Death Eaters are watching the house and neither can Remus because he's a werewolf, and neither can Theo, because Dumbledore's a *wanker*, so I can only take Hermione and Fred and George can help me and the Goblins can give me some kind of, I dunno, weird goblin protection," Harrison says in a rush. "But Dumbledore's given up being my steward and Magnus will get it now. That's the good news."

Severus stares at his child for a moment and then looks up at the ceiling. He begins to count. *Yuz, doksan, seksen ... That fucking cunt-bastard old man, I will pull his beard out hair by hair.*

"You have bargained with Albus," Severus watches Harrison's face. "He came to you with this?"

Harrison nods. He looks miserable. Severus knows he is not completely telling the truth.

"He came to you with something else," Severus surmises and Harrison grimaces. He reaches under the duvet and pulls out a crumpled letter, tossing it onto the duvet between him and Severus. It is an unpleasant jolt to recognise that handwriting, something fearful and visceral that twists his

stomach into knots. Perhaps the sight of the handwriting of a childhood bully will always do that to a person. "A letter from your stepfather."

"From Da - James, yeah," Harrison mumbles. Severus is not slighted by the use of this word. For Harrison, Potter shall always be 'James' or 'Dad'. Severus suspects that Lupin could someday ascend to the title, especially when Harrison has called Remus his 'father' in passing. Severus has no allusions about who he is. He is the Sire. He is the provider of the genetic material, he is the man who slept with Lily and now he is the protector. He knows who he is. It does not mean it does not ring hollow to his ears to hear James bloody Potter called 'Dad' by his only child. "He wrote to me about the Potter Lordship ring. Apparently it, like, just turns up. I have to prove myself or some shit, like the sword of Gryffindor."

"Language," Severus reminds him. Likely, when living in Rome with Lupin, Harrison has been allowed to curse as freely as he likes. He looks down at the letter but does not ask to open it. He can be satisfied with Harrison's explanation of its contents, no matter how curious he is to see how Potter spoke to the child he blood adopted. *Without my permission.* "Albus brought this to you?"

"Yeah, I was ... I was on my second date." Harrison looks utterly devastated for a second and then snorts derisively, rubbing at his scar. "Which was an utter shit show, as it turns out."

Severus decides to let that curse word slide. *Only two dates and both of them were ruined by people who should know better.*

"Theodore came to Rome?" He asks instead. It is a wildly generous but also reckless gesture and very much unlike the Slytherin that Severus knows.

"Yeah, he wore a fancy glamour but ... Dumbledore saw him." Harrison looks pensive for a moment, then his eyes flick to Severus' face. "Don't worry, I drowned my books, like, completely. Dumbledore said occlumency must be going well."

"Well done," Severus praises lightly, but internally he is overjoyed. He and Harrison have not been working on Occlumency but he knows his child could revolutionise the field one day. *If he can get through one fucking day without something utterly unfeasible happening.* "Did he use legilimency on you?"

"Yeah, but he didn't see anything," Harrison winces and Severus' anger flares. *Fucking Albus.* "Fucking hurt though."

"Language," Severus says but reaches inside his pocket for a pain-relieving potion. He offers it to Harrison who knocks it back without a word, licking his lips.

"Did you brew this today?" He asks and Severus nods. "Tastes sweet."

"I am experimenting with liquorice root," Severus says. "Why did you accept this exchange? The Goblin King could likely have pressed Albus into compliance."

"Yeah, I know, Griphook wanted him there."

"You didn't see a reason to comply?" Severus asks. He knows the Goblin King will have opinions and it is likely that Severus will hear about all of them from SteelClaw. "Why?"

"Because I want him *out* ," Harrison snarls. "He wants to give opinions, he talks about forgiveness, how I'm the one who changed and he just ... this is quicker and I only have to do one thing."

It is not one thing, Severus thinks, *it is the worst thing*, but this is likely the last thing Harrison needs to hear.

"You are anxious to remove Albus from a position of control in your life," Severus rephrases and Harrison nods vigorously, staring up at Severus with pleading, green eyes.

"He's already getting the lessons and me back at Hogwarts and ..." Harrison swallows. "He doesn't know about ... beyond the veil. Or Sahara or other stuff. He knows about Theo but he doesn't *know* about Theo," *about the fidelity bond*, Severus translates. "If he's my Steward he might ... find out."

Severus sighs heavily and closes his eyes again. The child is right, of course, and that is supremely irritating but it is also unreasonably frustrating that Albus has likely gotten exactly what he desired. The position of the steward of the House of Black is restrictive, the magic clearly controlling in a way that Albus would not enjoy. There is also the possibility, Severus thinks, that Albus would not want to be so connected to the Black magic. *The Potter magic, on the other hand* ... Severus opens his eyes and looks at the letter in suspicion.

"Did he offer to help you with this?" Severus asks, tapping the letter.

"Yes," Harrison frowns. "How did you know?"

"I know Albus," Severus mutters and then looks into his son's face. "Why four days and four hours?"

"Because he reckons that's how long it will take for the protection on Petunia to be, like, charged up enough," Harrison says gruffly. "Not that it makes any sense."

"It does," Severus says. "It's a blood protection charm, it's bonded by the shared blood between you. If you loved one another -,"

"Ew," Harrison mutters.

"Or even liked one another -,"

"Not likely -,"

"Then it would not need to be strengthened or 'charged' as you put it," Severus says. "Your emotional connection would stretch across distances and assure the protection didn't break."

"But because she's a nightmare it's only charged up when I'm there," Harrison mutters, shaking his head. "Jesus, you think someone could have told her all she had to do was be nice to me and I would never have to go back there."

"It is ironic, yes," Severus says. There is another avenue Severus considers. That perhaps Albus did not share this information because he had hoped to provide a reason for Harrison to return to the safe obscurity of muggle life, year after year. A child well-liked enough so that the protection could endure summers spent away at friends' houses perhaps did not suit his needs and desires for the Boy-who-Lived. Severus decides to kill that thought, quickly, before it makes him too angry to speak. His son does not deserve his anger. He's clearly had a trying day and looks haggard. All

Severus cares about (at least at this moment) is his child's wellbeing. "So how did you achieve an agreement?"

If Severus knows the details, maybe he can undo it.

"We did vows, there was paparazzi there, there might be pictures," Harrison mutters in a rush, staring down at his fingers in the blankets. *Well, that's going to be a fucking nightmare.*

"That is tomorrow's problem," Severus says. "You will not go back there, Harrison."

"I have to, I made a vow," Harrison frowns. Of course, the child thinks his word is unimpeachable and above reproach and of course Severus could care fucking less about vow breaking if it keeps his child away from Vernon Dursley.

"You do not," Severus says lightly. "The Goblins are very clear about this kind of thing, vows given on paper by minors without proper supervision are not considered legal -,"

"I don't need supervision!" Harrison says hotly.

"Forgive me, it must be some other child who was accosted by a Headmaster today and coerced into taking a vow -,"

"I have to go back because it's a *bond*, not a vow," Harrison says churlishly. "We did it on magic. It's binding. So that's that."

Severus stares at the child. *So that's that.* He quickly buries his fury, which is like an exploding volcano inside his mind, under a slough of ice. If he rages at Harrison, the child will withdraw. Severus can already tell from Harrison's set jaw and watchful green eyes that he expects to be berated and as such, will hear not a word Severus speaks. So Severus does something he is supremely bad at around this child: he forces himself to hold his tongue. He stares at the ceiling and recites the ingredients in a bafflement brew.

Hornet wings, sharks fin ... Merlin, I want to strangle this boy ... ripened grapes of the vine of Dionysius ... How could he even think that this was a good idea? ... Grapefruit juice, Sloth toenails ... He has to go back or his magic will rebel and who the fuck knows what that would do to him? He could explode the universe or disappear into the Ghare Tareaqi ... Wasp sting, two ounces of pasteurised moose cheese ... Circe above, where's the fucking wolf when I need him?

By the time Severus has finished, Harrison is staring at him with the utmost expression of wariness, hands clenched on the duvet cover and trembling and Severus has come to one conclusion: if Harrison is going to go back to Petunia's house, Severus is going to ensure that firstly, it is the last time he ever does, and secondly, that Severus uses every second of his visit to ensure Petunia and her husband are eventually tried and convicted of egregious child abuse. There seems to be only one important thing to say.

"Harrison, no matter what vows have been made, what bonds -," Harrison's shoulders clench up towards his ears, "-I will ensure you do not come to harm," Severus says gently, reaching out to soften his child's grip. Harrison lets out a great, shuddering breath and closes his eyes, his entire body relaxing. Harrison nods but doesn't seem to be paying attention.

"Vernon will be the worst," Harrison whispers under his breath. "Dudley I can handle and I can take food with me, but Vernon ... he can do a lot in four days."

"He will do nothing," Severus tries to keep his voice steady. His instinct to protest this situation, to rage at it and plot a way to undo it, is rapidly being overtaken by a stronger instinct: to *ensure the health of the child*. "Until you can fight and win ..."

"Inspire fear and survive," Harrison mutters. "But Vernon's never been scared of me."

"You have not been Lord Black before," Severus still hates the fact that his son carries the burden of the House of Black but it could be helpful in this situation. "Lordship and Heirship magic cannot be traced by the Ministry of Magic. Unlike your ill-advised hover charm three years ago."

"That wasn't me, that was Dobby. You want me to ... hurt Vernon?" Harrison frowns.

"Yes," Severus says.

"Jesus," Harrison flops his head back against the metal bed frame with a clang. Severus worries at the ease with which he hurts himself. "You sound just like him."

"Like whom?"

"Tom," Harrison keeps his eyes closed tightly shut, shaking his head softly from side to side. "When he possessed me he said that. How he would hurt Vernon for me. If I ..." the boy swallows heavily. "If I was his."

It is horrible that his son knows what the Dark Lord sounds like, that he can easily pick out his cadence or phrases. Severus wonders how many 'flashes' of rage Harrison is experiencing that the Dark Lord can so easily whisper into his mind and feels a cramp of agony, low in his stomach. Severus recalls his early days with the Dark Lord. How, when he was a teenager brewing for the still handsome and attentive Lord Gaunt, he would speak to his new Master about his father. "*You deserve to be cherished, little brewer,*" his Master whispers in his ear. "*If the muggle were dead, you could be.*" It is soul-destroying to hear that the same monster who groomed him has fixed his eyes upon his son. *I will not let him have Harrison.*

"I should have been clearer," Severus says levelly. "I wish you to protect yourself if you are assaulted. I wish you to be clear with that man that you will not endure punishment at his hands. I do not suggest inflicting pain for pain's sake only."

"Yeah, that is more Tom's speed," Harrison mumbles, taking a shuddering breath. "But Vernon might ... he might hurt me anyway. He could find a way. He's so much bigger than me."

Severus wonders if this is what it feels like when a heart breaks for a child. When something desolate and raw and sweeping floods through a parent at the sight of Harrison's worried, resigned eyes. Severus is sure Harrison has grown in the two weeks they have been apart but he is still so very slight. Vernon Dursley could crush his windpipe in one hand. The thought makes Severus' wand arm twitch. *I will take him apart.* Severus has promised himself that revenge or justice against the inhabitants of number four, Privet Drive, belongs to Harrison alone, but that does not mean Severus will not relish it when Harrison finally decides to give it.

"He will not find a way," Severus says silkily. "You are the Ward of the Goblin King, you have your own *Anzar*; you will be protected."

Severus knows that even if he and Lupin cannot stop this from happening, and cannot immediately undo the product of Harrison's recklessness, they can at least trust that King Ragnok will not allow

the boy he is already risking so much for to come to harm at the hands of muggles.

“Yeah,” Harrison mumbles, still looking distressed.

“Also, we can perhaps use this opportunity to ... gather evidence,” Severus says hesitantly. He knows this word is incredibly tricky around Harrison. “Of the abuse.”

Harrison glares at him for a moment but thankfully, does not shoot him down the stairs with magic. Instead, he shrugs desolately.

“It never works,” he mumbles and Severus’ heart clenches with recognition. *Lily, pressing a cold flannel to the welts on the backs of his thighs. “Why don’t you say something, Sev?” Severus, mumbles through sniffling tears: “Because nothing ever works.”*

“I will make it work,” Severus says simply. “Your godfather, no doubt, will turn heaven and earth and multiple government systems to make it work. If you want to bring them to justice, we can make it happen. It is your choice.”

“What would be justice?” Harrison mutters quietly to himself, slumping further down the bed. Severus can tell that he is two seconds away from yanking the duvet back over his head, but before he does, there is a loud crack and the elf is there, standing over Harrison on the bed with the hissing reptile around his throat, scowling madly.

"Master must not disappear!" Kreacher snarls, poking Harrison's thigh with a long finger.
"Kreacher had treacle tart in the oven!"

"Sorry!" Harrison scowls at his elf, grabbing one of the pillows and hugging it to his stomach. "I was Dumbledored!"

“Master's hissing beast is thirsty!” Kreacher lifts the serpent gingerly and places it on the bedclothes, snarling at it when it hisses at him. "Master must feed her!"

"Yes, alright, Kreacher!" Harrison snaps, his eyes slipping towards Severus, as they always used to do when Severus would catch him preparing to lie in his younger years. *Oh, what have you done?*
"Can you put a treacle tart in the oven here instead?"

"Master is staying?" Kreacher asks, eyes flitting between Severus and Harrison. The child raises his eyebrows at Severus and then rolls his eyes, drolly.

"Well, I'm not going back there if Dumbledore's hanging around Rome,” he mutters. “Blaise told me to go.”

Severus looks at Kreacher and tries not to show his delight in this. He had been preparing for a brief interaction with his son in Rome, laden with a difficult conversation with the wolf, followed by their departure to Venice. He had expected to bear the weight of their absence painfully for longer. Now, he shall at least have Harrison. For now.

"Yes, he will be," Severus says. "Will you tell the wolf?"

"Kreacher does not answer to Lord Prince," Kreacher sniffs, his eyes sliding to Harrison. "Not without incentives."

"I don't have any more of those Italian chocolates, Kreacher," Harrison sighs. "Besides, you stole my fucking gelato."

"Master should expect to have his gelato stolen if he is so slow and Master is a *liar*," Kreacher growls. "Kreacher can smell chocolate in his room!"

"Fine!" Harrison throws up his hands. "But you won't have any for your birthday now, will you?"

"House elves do not have birthdays," Severus says.

"Yeah, and that seems really crappy to me," Harrison scowls. Of course, the boy is sensitive to the idea of missed birthdays. "So he's sharing mine."

"Kreacher does not care for Master's stupid ideas, Kreacher has lived many years longer than Dumbledore even and has never needed a stupid Wixen day," Kreacher's eyes glitter dangerously. "Kreacher *needs* chocolates."

"Under the floorboard by the bedside cabinet," Harrison rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. "But you have to listen to Severus the whole time we're here."

"Kreacher will listen," Kreacher grins widely and cackles madly before disappearing.

"Pissing hell," Harrison groans. "Left a loophole."

"You are still hiding food under floorboards? Does the Contessa not serve to your liking?" Severus demands.

"I have to hide snacks from Kreacher, I'm not a total idiot," Harrison snorts. Severus is looking at the serpent, remembering Lupin's words on the topic from their various exchanges: *I can't help feeling like we are missing something there ...*

"And what does the elf mean?" Severus asks, gesturing to the snake. "She still hunts, does she not?"

"Course she does, he didn't mean anything," Harrison picks up the serpent, letting it wrap around his wrist. Severus narrows his eyes. If the serpent hunts then why would the reptile need Harrison for food? He watches the snake's head as it turns towards Harrison's shoulder as if beginning an ascent towards Harrison's pulse point ...

"*Revelio*," Severus whispers, pointing his wand at Harrison's neck just as, at that moment, Harrison slaps a hand over his throat, looking guiltily up at his Sire.

You ridiculous adolescent, what have you done now?

Severus grips Harrison's wrist, noticing that the half-finger on the hand is much healthier than it looked two weeks ago. Harrison scowls at him brutally, but Severus is unmoved. He tugs the boy's hand away. There are two, perfectly spaced, red dots on his throat. Barely healed over, as if they are freshly punctured regularly. It is so akin to the mark of a vampire that Severus actually has a chill that runs down his back.

"Tell me," he says, trying not to let his voice shake. " *Tell me* that you have not been allowing a magical boomslang to inject you with venom."

"Course not," Harrison scoffs, but there is still a flush in his cheeks and he will not meet Severus' eye. *That means I am not going to like the truth.* "I just ... let her drink my blood, sometimes."

Severus stares at Harrison. It is a sign of the type of child he is parenting, that the truth of what he is up to is worse than the idea of being attacked by a literal vampire. After the news about Albus and the Dursleys, Severus did not expect to hear worse news today. Yet here it is.

"You just let her drink your blood?" Severus repeats dully. "Sometimes?"

"She was really weak after the Slytherin magic ... y'know," Harrison winces as if the loss of it is a bereavement he cannot quite put into words yet. "Blood made it better, I just ... y'know, slept longer. In the Deep Place."

Harrison's voice has become a mumble and Severus can understand why. Most of the time, he feels that he does at least an adequate job of maintaining a phlegmatic state when confronted by Harrison's increasingly absurd levels of strangeness but this is pushing against a ledge he had not realised existed.

You little shitting demon, I will ground you for the rest of the century.

"You mean to tell me that you stayed in a comatose state for five hellish, worrying days because you were feeding your pet?" Severus hisses, unable to stop his hands clenching into fists. "With your own *blood*?"

"Look, she's not just a pet!" Harrison says hotly. "She's special!"

"Yes, she is!" Severus snarls. "Because you are feeding her blood!"

"No, because she talks to me!"

"All serpents do!"

"Not parseltongue, she talks inside my head!" Harrison snaps back. "She can hear me even when I'm really far away and she can sense my feelings and she's really fucking smart and I didn't want her to die, so yeah! She can have my blood!"

Severus stares at his son for a moment and wonders if he is having a very vivid, cruciatus-induced hallucination. He looks down at his dark mark to check. It is static. It always writhes during the curse. This is really happening. Severus stares down at the reptile, noticing the glossy sheen on it that had vanished when Harrison was kidnapped, how it seemed to dull and weaken without him.

"How far?" Severus asks abruptly.

"What?" Harrison stares at him blankly.

"How far can the distance be that you can still ..." Severus struggles for the right words. "Mentally communicate?"

"Um ... I could hear her in Ireland when I was in Skye," Harrison frowns, thinking hard. "In the Burrow, too."

"In the cage?" Severus demands.

"No," Harrison strokes the snake, jaw tight. "It didn't happen like this until after. Before then, we could only do it when we were together."

"Between Rome and here?" Severus prompts.

"Uh, yeah," Harrison says, thinking for a moment. The child clearly has no idea how rare this is, but Severus' mind is whirring. *Merlin and Archimedes. Agroboda and Jormungand. Elizabeth Demdike and Tibb.*

"The feeling sensing," Severus says curtly. "Explain."

"She can sense my pain, sometimes. Like, in the shack, with Sirius," Harrison scowls, his eyes fixed on the snake's scales. "She came. She felt my pain. She knows about magic too, things that nobody knows, about Merlin and the Deep Place and Oldest and Deepest. She knows ... she knows who I am."

Severus understands only a tiny portion of that, but the little he does understand makes his blood boil, which is ironic.

"Of course she does," Severus hisses. "This is blood magic, Harrison, I explained about blood magic."

"I didn't mean to do it and it's not like anyone knows about Sahara!" Harrison exclaims. "Besides, how is it illegal to feed a snake blood?"

"It is illegal to share wixen magic with other creatures, it is why goblins and house elves and centaurs do not carry wands." Severus cannot help the frustration in his voice and the feeling of irritation only increases when Harrison rolls his eyes mulishly.

"So it's stupid then," he grumbles. "It's a stupid, bigoted law."

"It does not stop it carrying an Azkaban sentence," Severus snaps. "That is the current punishment for imbuing a creature with magical properties."

"Really?" Harrison looks down at the snake. "I've been feeding her the Slytherin magic since before Theo even got her."

Severus stares at Harrison and for a moment, wonders if he will faint. He has always assumed, and he realises now how dangerous that is around Harrison, that Theodore had purchased a magical creature.

"You created your own familiar," Severus' voice seems to have been reduced to a whisper. "That is why she faded when you were gone, why she suffered when you detached from the Slytherin Magic. You ... she was not a magical boomslang before."

He made her magical. The concept is revolutionary, dangerous and terrifying.

"Huh?" Harrison shakes his head as if Severus is the one saying things that are utterly beyond the realm of sensible. "No, she just likes the taste of magic, that's all. Besides, she's not *my* familiar, Theo and I have a timeshare."

"Does she come for Theodore?" Severus demands. "Does she hear his thoughts and share his mind?"

"No, but he doesn't speak parseltongue very well," Harrison shrugs. *Holy Merlin and Hades below, this child will be the death of me if I do not strangle him with my bare hands first.*

"Harrison, you will tell no one of this," Severus says slowly, speaking as clearly as he possibly can. "This is a display of ..." Severus wants to say prowess but it's not accurate, for Harrison did nothing to achieve it. He simply was. "... of your true nature that cannot be revealed to others."

"Oh," Harrison bites his lip and lets the snake's tongue tickle his ear. "Like a Magey, Necromancy thing? Like how I ... did the blood magic with Theo with the jar?"

"Yes," Severus says drily.

"People ... other Wixen, they don't have animals like this?" Harrison looks at him cautiously. "Because Hedwig is really smart too, and the pixie -,"

"We will not speak of the attempted murder weapon of Dolores Umbridge," Severus says, holding up his hands in protest. Harrison scowls. He's already had to field questions from The Department of Magical Creatures about this. He had to pass the pixie off as an unusual and rare inhabitant of the Forbidden Forest, which was no mean feat.

"I didn't put it in the teapot," Harrison grumbles. "I didn't tell Kreacher to either."

"Either way, nobody knows that the pixie responsible for blinding and devouring half of a woman's brain was previously in your possession and I would rather it was kept that way," Severus says. Harrison tilts his head and looks at Severus sharply.

"Blaise said you kept her alive," he says.

"I did."

If only so I could watch her suffer later and the Contessa could instrument her demise.

"Did you re-grow her brain?" Harrison asks, eyes glinting. "Her eyes?"

"The first is not possible and whilst the second is, there seems little point in it since the first implies she will never again walk, move, breathe or speak without magical intervention," Severus says. Harrison nods curtly.

"Good," he mutters, as if it is not a horrible, if adequately deserved, fate to suffer. The boy then looks back down at his snake. "So this stuff with Sahara speaking to me, like she has memories of the past and she's ... well, she's always in my head, it's a me thing? Not a Sahara thing?"

"It is likely," Severus nods. He makes a mental note to read much more about Wixen familiar bonds.

"And no one else does it?" Harrison asks, a little desperately.

"It is not unprecedented," Severus says with hesitation. *It is just the existing precedents have been set by some of the most powerful creatures to ever live.* "Merlin had a familiar."

"He was a Mage, like me," Harrison frowns. "Were they all Mages?"

“Agroboda was a witch and a Necromancer, she had a familiar that bears some of the traits of your bond with this serpent,” Severus says slowly. “Elizabeth Demdike also, and she was a Seer of unparalleled.”

“So they’re not all Mages,” Harrison mutters.

“No, but they were ... unusual in their bonds. The vast majority of wixen who have familiars often only experience the extended life of the creature they bond with. Albus and his bird, for instance.”

“Fawkes,” Harrison mutters and Severus tries not to scowl, but Harrison notices and grins. “He doesn’t think much of you, either.”

“He’ll think even less of me when I have his tail feathers for a brew,” Severus snarks and Harrison snorts, biting his lip. “These wixen with familiars are not able to communicate with them over great distances or ...” Severus looks at the serpent suspiciously. “Create their own familiar from a non-magical creature. In fact, it has been posited that the ability to do so is little more than a myth.”

“Great,” Harrison scowls darkly. “Another reason for people to call me crazy.”

Severus narrows his eyes at that particular word. It is not how he wants his child to characterise himself.

“They will not since they will not know,” Severus says evenly.

“Yeah, just like they don’t know about Death talking to me and meeting her beyond the veil and her helping me send the Obscurus to the land beyond because if they knew those things, they’d think I was a *fucking psycho* !” Harrison suddenly yells. Severus was not expecting this. He finds himself blinking at his child for a second, unsure if this is muggle atheism or mental health stigma or some kind of ingrained personal distaste for the spiritual, but only one word pops out of his mouth.

“Language,” he says weakly. Harrison’s green eyes are suddenly cloudy with grey mist, threatening to turn to black, and utterly irate.

“Do you believe me?” He snaps.

“You know that I do,” Severus cannot help the feeling that he is suddenly standing in front of a gathering storm.

“Do you believe that Death can do those things and it’s real and not a myth?” Harrison demands, glaring up at Severus with his peridot eyes glowing softly. Severus has a strong feeling of Deja Vu. “Tell the truth!”

Severus yanks up his Occlumency shields just in time to protect himself from the light dusting of compulsion in Harrison’s voice. Severus stares at his son, one eyebrow raised with a clear message.

“I thought Weasley had a discussion with you about voice magic and compulsions,” Severus says quietly. As well as teaching Harrison how to wield his axe with his new disability, Weasley has been trying to educate Harrison about the dangers of voice magic. Clearly, it has not been going as well as Weasley hopes.

“Yeah,” Harrison grumbles, flushing slightly. “He told me what you told me, that compulsions can take away people’s free will and they’re, like, considered as bad as an imperius curse and they’re

not addictive but they can become habitual and then you're like, essentially a criminal all the time and Goblins hate Wixen because they can do them and Goblins can't and Goblins think it's a sign of how Wixen abuse magic and ... Tom and Grindlewald are really good at them."

"So why would you do this?" Severus asks softly. Harrison flinches as violently as if Severus has hit him.

"Maybe I wanted to use it," Harrison says, slumping down against the pillows, his face mulish again.

"Maybe you wanted to compel me into telling the same thing I have just told you?" Severus raises his eyebrows.

"Maybe you lied," Harrison mumbles.

"Do I lie to you, Harrison?" *Now?* Is the implicit word behind that question, since their encounters up until Yule last year had been entirely characterised by falsehoods. Severus is relieved when Harrison shakes his head. "So why would this be so important to you?"

Harrison sighs and closes his eyes, drops his head back against the metal bed frame with a dull thunk. His sudden weariness is a sign, Severus realises, of the volatile range of his emotions at the moment. He looks down at the rubber band on his son's wrist. He's only been wearing it less than two weeks and it looks worn already.

"Did you believe me?" Harrison asks dully, his green eyes less misty and more resigned. "About Death and ... the veil and stuff? Did ... did you believe me when I said I had met her?"

"Why would I disbelieve you?" Severus asks curiously. He is not sure who or what has got into the boy's head but it clearly matters.

"Hermione said it's ... it's a matter of faith, life after death," Harrison swallows heavily. "That Wixen, like, rely on muggleborns just believing it when really, no one knows."

We know the truth, don't we Sev? Eileen's voice echoes inside Severus' mind. *Sparks through the veil.* Severus never expected to be in the position of explaining his incredibly private inherited cultural beliefs to anyone, let alone his son. Yet here he is, where he never expected to be. *With my child, the Mage that Eileen wished for.*

"That is an interpretation," Severus says slowly. "Lupin would undoubtedly agree with Miss Granger. I imagine Mr Nott would disagree."

"Yeah, because Theo has Gods, he has a religion," Harrison's face is taut with some kind of despair. "I don't have any of that but I'm still ... I *met* Her. She's *real*. I see Her, I see the Grim, I hear them, I hear the Black Prince, I've seen the far green country, it's all fucking *real* so what the *fuck* does that mean? How do I even -?"

"Breathe, Harrison," Severus urges. The boy is starting to tremble and he shakes his head, face pale and eyes squeezed tightly shut.

"I've *seen* it, it's *real*, so did it all happen? Or is it just something I believe?" Harrison's eyes pop open and they are full of fear. "Hermione said people could use me, could make me think things

were real, that I'm being, I dunno, set up to be a fucking cult leader and that the veil could be a trick but I know, *I know* it wasn't, *I felt it*, so am I ... am I going crazy?"

Severus stares at his son. A year ago, he would have answered this question very differently. Eileen's instructions were just the passed down lore of a mad woman, a person driven to melancholy by the loss of culture and brutal abuse. He looked at the lore of the Princes gone before as historically interesting but unverifiable. He thought of Eileen with pity and fury, that her life's blood was spent teaching him to guard something that didn't exist. Now there is Harrison, and all the words make sense. *We guard the Mages, Sev, the ones that stand on the plane between life and death. We hold the Ghare Tareaqi. We know the secrets of oblivion. They do not watch for our footsteps, for they will never see us coming.*

"I believe you," Severus reaches his right hand out to his son. Harrison gingerly offers his hand, his palm is a little sweaty with distress and the mild tremor still there underneath his wand holster. Severus turns his palm upwards and presses the gemstone of the Prince ring against his son's. "Ask for a secret."

This time, Harrison does not question it, as he did after Umbridge attacked him. He simply stares at the place where their rings meet.

"Why do you believe me?" he whispers. "Why do you believe I can hear and see Death and I'm not ... insane?"

Severus thinks this is something that is better shown than told, so he does something he never in his life ever expected to do.

"*Negahban*," Severus breathes out slowly, remembering ancient incantations that he has never seen used. Why would he? For there has never been a Mage to guard before. "*Hifazat jaaduugar šāhzādeh.*"

The Princes watch and protect the Mages. Shadows spool out of their rings like tentacles made of dark mist, ancient, unused magic seeking and hunting for what they had been created so long ago to guard. They take flight, grow wings, and Severus sees the kingfishers that Harrison first formed in the Prince shadows with Narcissa, swoop low, their shadowy wings circling above his head. Severus swallows hard. For a second, Severus is standing in the back garden of Spinner's End with Eileen, his new wand in hand.

"This is the first spell I will teach you," Eileen whispers, holding her own wand in her hand so elegantly.

"What is it?" Severus whispers. His new wand feels as heavy as his new ring. He is nine years old and his hands always feel heavy with magic now.

"It's a spell that helps us, an ancient spell for the Mages," she says, kissing his forehead. Severus wants to shout at her, wants to bellow that there are no Mages so these kinds of spells don't matter, but he holds his tongue. Eileen whispers the words and the shadowy kingfishers flit across the sky, cawing for a lost Mage and magic long forgotten. Eileen watches them in despair.

"This is how we will know, Sev, that they are true and we must guard them," she whispers. "The magic always knows them. Always."

"What are they doing?" Harrison whispers, watching the birds circle him. He had not known up until this point if this incantation was even real, ever possibly viable. Yet here they are. *It's all real.* Severus feels as if he is breaking out in a cold sweat because a part of him is still screaming, violently, that this cannot be real even as he knows, in his bones and his blood and with his sharp, inquiring mind which has never failed to see the danger six moves ahead, that it must be. *He is a Mage. I am his guardian.*

"Looking for you," Severus can't help the small rueful smile that plays across his lips. *What she would have given to see this.* For the first time in a very long time, Severus thinks fondly of Eileen. "The Princes guard the beings of extraordinary magical power, Mages, like you. Our magic seeks you out, wants to protect your secrets, to protect you."

"That's why the ring always hides," Harrison mutters. His eyes flitter up to Severus', green and glowing. "So ... you know what I am?"

"I know what you can be," Severus corrects gently because he is not sure even Eileen would know what Harrison is. There are patterns in Mage lore and whilst Harrison meets some of them, in others he is entirely different. For instance, Severus has not heard of a Mage who is also a Necromancer, but he has definitely never heard of a Mage who is so closely connected to Lady Death. "There is variation, there is potential. You are not set in stone, *farzandam.*"

Harrison's eyebrows shoot up at that. Severus wonders how much of Harrison's short life he has felt like that - as if everything were decided. *The Boy-Who-Lived. The Chosen One.* The boy has endured far too much of this already.

"But the Death stuff, it doesn't worry you?" Harrison presses. Severus shakes his head. "Why?"

Severus is not sure how to explain it. He could say that British wixen culture and British culture, in general, does not understand or honour the complexities of mortality as other cultures do. He could say that the *Ghare Tareaqi* and the literal reality of carrying the capability to access an alternate plane of existence around on his finger since he was nine years old has made him naturally much more open to the possibility of other realms. He could say that he pledged his life to a madman at seventeen years old and has lived so long with so many ghosts in his heart that he hopes desperately for another world. Another chance to say goodbye. To ask forgiveness. To make amends. In the end, however, Severus decides to say the words Harrison will most understand.

"Because I too, have always felt Death close," Severus says. He remembers words that his Grandfather said on his deathbed and repeats them. "I do not fear her for who she is, only what traversing with her may mean."

Leaving you, Harrison.

Severus turns his palm over and the shadows retreat, birds turning to wisps, caressing Harrison's shoulders in their descent until only the tethers between them remain. Oddly, before he can withdraw, he feels his tether tighten, holding his hand in place. He looks at Harrison's face, at the thoughtful, troubled expression there. Then Harrison puts his hand down on the duvet between them and the tethers are so tight, that Severus' follows. Two hands, resting together. Severus stares, just as he did in the hospital wing when Harrison was so full of pain and rage and despair. Today he marvels at how the skin of his child's hand is the same shade as his. *My skin. My child.*

"My hands are like yours," Harrison whispers, and Severus tries not to jerk away. He is sure the child cannot read his mind but it is uncanny. Those green eyes are fixed on Severus' hand. "Same

fingers."

"Not quite," Severus says softly. He lifts his hand as high as the tether will allow and gently points to Harrison's nails. "These are your mothers, see how they are shorter, blunter in shape?"

"Really?" Harrison stares at his nails as if they are the most miraculous things in the world. "Did she ... I dunno, wear nail polish like Mi does?"

"When we were twelve we both wore black nail varnish for a whole summer," Severus says wryly. "Petunia was less than impressed."

"She always wears pink," Harrison huffs but does not stop staring greedily at his hands, like a cat watching fish beneath the water. Severus hesitates and then points gently to his son's smallest finger.

"Your maternal grandfather, Mr Evans, he had the same, slightly crooked here," Severus says slowly.

"Yeah?" Harrison whispers.

"Yes," Severus nods and drifts his finger slowly to Harrison's thumb. "Your maternal grandmother, Mrs Evans, she had the same slimness of the joint here, your grandfather's thumbs were rounded, and so were Lily's. Mine is different too. This is Mrs Evans, and this ..." Severus places a thumb and index finger on either side of Harrison's wrist, accentuating the sharpness of the wrist bone. "... Is your paternal grandmother."

"Eileen," Harrison says. Severus cramps. There is something impossibly meaningful about her name being spoken on his son's lips, right now. *She gave up so much on the chance of meeting you, farzandam.*

"What about the man?" Harrison asks quietly. "Tobias? Your Vernon?"

Severus doesn't breathe for a moment. He wants to lie, wants to say that he sees nothing of Tobias in himself or his son but it would be a cruel lie. He touches the tops of Harrison's fingers.

"A lack of mid-digit hair on this part of the finger," Severus says. "That is Tobias."

"Nothing else?" Harrison asks. Severus knows what he is being asked. *Do you see him in me, sometimes, and hate me the same?*

"I do not look for him as I look for others who were cherished," Severus says slowly. "Faces I remember, hands and movements ... I do not see him when I watch you."

I see him far too often in myself. Inside his head, Severus hears Regulus' voice: *Like father like son, Severus.*

"I don't want to go back there," Harrison says in a small voice. "I didn't ... I didn't do it because I want it or I'm stupid, I just ... I need it to be done. But I don't want to go back."

Severus looks up at sees the meaning in his eyes. He is thinking again of his own Tobias, to whose unpleasant mercies he shall be delivered next week. For a moment, he sounds much younger than fifteen and Severus can't help pressing his palm against the back of the child's hand.

"Whatever the cost, no matter how difficult, know that we can find a way to release you from this bond," Severus says, trying to keep his voice neutral. *I will have such words with Albus when I have the opportunity.* "We can speak to the goblins. We can examine the wording of your vow. We can use a meditative process to communicate with your own magic and discern truly how much of your own magic is bonded into this vow."

Severus wonders if because Harrison has so much magic, he could endure the loss of a part of it from breaking his vow.

"I can just ask it, I swore with the Black magic," Harrison shrugs and looks down at the Black diamond with a frown on his face. *Of course you can,* Severus thinks dazedly. The child proves his utter abnormality at every turn. A white light erupts around the finger. Harrison sighs and Severus knows that if Harrison swore on the Black magic, there is no way that he would ever consider revoking the magic to break his bond. When Harrison speaks, Severus is not surprised by his words. "It won't let me break the bond."

"Why?" Severus asks quietly. He does not even consider suggesting that Harrison give up the Black magic to be an oathbreaker. He remembers those cold winter days when Harrison would stand with his mangled hand pressed into the frosty grass of their garden. He knows Harrison will never give it up. *I am not sure it would be even possible,* Severus thinks, staring at the diamond that is fused to his son's bone.

"Because it knows I get justice this way, that this way I don't ever have to go back and ..."
Harrison shifts uncomfortably. "Voldemort won't be able to kill them. I don't want Voldemort to kill them."

"I see." Severus tries not to sound surprised. Petunia and Vernon Dursley are some of the few people Severus would quite happily hand over to the Dark Lord.

"Not because I want them to be alive," Harrison scowls. *That sounds more like my son.* "I just ... if he kills them, he'll say it's for me. I know he will. He'll ... use it, somehow."

Harrison's face twists in disgust but Severus knows precisely what he means. He thinks of Tobias' body, buried twenty minutes away, down by Cokeworth river. He thinks of the Dark Lord's glee and satisfaction. *What a faithful thing you are, little brewer.* He thinks of the Dark Lord's satisfied expression when he spoke of Harrison's mind: *Little by little, in his darkest moments, he will come to expect me. He knows what I offer him is far greater than what Albus ever could.* If the Dark Lord can offer Harrison retribution, would Harrison find it difficult to reject? Severus is suddenly proud of his son's insight if also filled with dread at his accurate perception of the Dark Lord.

"Yes," Severus nods shortly. "He shall."

"I thought so," Harrison nods, something steely coming into his eyes. He has not moved his hands from under Severus', nor softened the tethering between them. Severus makes no attempt to stretch it. "Remus doesn't know. I mean, he knows I saw Sirius beyond the veil, but he doesn't know about Lady Death. Beyond the veil. The Land Beyond. Or the Black Prince." Harrison sighs. "He wouldn't get it."

Only half of that makes sense to me, also, Severus thinks, but he chooses his words carefully.

"You saw the Black Prince beyond the veil?"

"Yeah," Harrison lifts up his left hand from where it is absent-mindedly stroking Sahara's scales. "He gave me my ring."

Accessing spirits. Necromantic arts. Severus does not think it will do the child any good to hear that at the moment but he adds it to his list to discuss with Lupin. *The child may actually be a Necromancer as well as a Mage as if we didn't have enough to lose sleep over.*

"It appears it is necessary to include other areas on our regular wellbeing check-up," Severus says curtly.

"Really? Jesus, it's already so damn long," Harrison groans, grabbing the pillow and stuffing his face into it. He still has not moved his hand from underneath Severus' so Severus does not either.

"And yet we shall commence. Scar?" Severus demands.

"Fine," Harrison mumbles into the pillow. "Usual."

So agonizing at night and irritating daily.

"Ankle?" Severus continues.

"Better," Harrison mutters. "Aches a bit to run."

"Then do not run," Severus drawls. "Finger?"

Harrison does not answer but holds up his middle finger for perusal and defiance. Since the child can't see him with his head buried in a pillow, Severus allows himself a small smirk.

"Healing well," Severus says. "Tremor?"

"The same," Harrison peeks one green eye out with a glare. "Except for when I hold an axe."

"This is still not adequate reasoning for openly carrying an axe everywhere you go."

"Boring," Harrison mutters.

"Hand?" Severus prompts. Harrison buries his face in the pillow again but twists his hand to show the cut on his palm, which is healing normally. "Scars?"

Harrison sighs and pulls his face up, using his left hand to lift his shirt and reveal some of the silvery scars from his encounter with Dolores and more recently, from Bellatrix.

"The ones from the cage are fine," Harrison scowls darkly. "The blood quill ones don't fade."

"Yet," Severus reminds him. He has been working hard on a potion that will fade them, but it is taking him time that he resents. "Dreams?"

"The same," Harrison mutters.

"Edges?" Severus keeps his voice deliberately light here. They have been doing this questionnaire either through Lupin or in letter form, not face to face for two weeks, and Harrison knows that Lupin has been telling him about Harrison's nighttime disturbances. Harrison gives him a sharp look but then looks down at where their hands meet.

"Bad," he says quietly. Severus is not at all surprised but is still quietly distraught by it. The child's body is healing. The mind, however, is another matter and in that area, there is no potion that Severus can brew. He hopes to Hades that the techniques he's been pulling out of muggle books have been working.

"Now to the new additional questions," Severus says briskly. "Snake bites?"

"How am I meant to answer that?" Harrison demands.

"How many times a day and how much blood," Severus snaps. "I will also be adding blood replenishers to your potion regimen."

"Oh, c'mon," Harrison groans, but seeing Severus' glare he rolls his eyes and sighs. "Once a day, and I dunno. She drinks for like ... twenty minutes."

"One replenisher a day," Severus says curtly. "And no more than thirty minutes ever. Do you understand?"

"I'm not an idiot," Harrison grumbles. "How do you even know how long is too long?"

"I have several vampires inside my acquaintance," Severus says and Harrison's eyes widen with interest. "Spirit visitations?"

"What?" Harrison says blankly.

"Any apparitions? Appearances of people long dead?" Severus prompts. *Such as Dark Lords from the middle ages. Or Black. Jesus fucking Merlin, I hope he does not become a fixture.*

"None when I'm awake, Death doesn't count," Harrison scowls. Severus admits that Death herself cannot be considered actively dead. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"I am your Guardian, I must know when the veil is breached," Severus says, falling into Eileen's language without meaning to.

"The veil is in the Ministry," Harrison frowns. "And you're not my Guardian, not technically, Remus and Bill are."

"The veil refers to any traverse between worlds, and I am the Lord to the House of Prince, the last guardian of the ancient magics, I guard you in all the ways that matter," Severus says smartly, and then reaches inside his robe for a vial. Harrison is looking a little stunned by his words but watches with interest. "Take this."

Harrison takes it and rolls the vial between his hands.

"You're not, you know," he says quietly.

"I am not what?" Severus asks.

"The last guardian," Harrison looks up at him with clear green eyes. "I mean, I know I'm the thing you guard but I'm also your heir so ... you're not the last. Right?"

Severus stares at the child, at the impossible, infuriating, magnificent child in front of him. *Lily, how did he come to be?*

“Yes,” Severus swallows hard. “You are correct. Now take your potion.”

"What is it?" Harrison asks.

"A dreamless sleep I have altered," Severus says, pulling his hand away from Harrison's, feeling the tethers flex to allow it, as he uncorks the vial. By altered, he means increased the potency until it is almost at the level he would have to report it. “You should sleep before supper. You are tired.”

“I’m tired all the time,” Harrison mutters, rubbing his chest.

“What hurts?” Severus demands.

“Nothing,” Harrison rolls his eyes when Severus glares at him. “My ... bond. The fidelity bond.”

Severus stares at Harrison’s chest. For all that he reads, for all that he has spent every free moment whilst his child and lover have been in Rome reading and researching and corresponding furiously with Narcissa to trade theories and information, every conversation with Harrison reveals yet something more Severus was not aware he did not know. He has not felt like this since his first year in Hogwarts, before he met Remus and finally had a study partner, when he felt like he was working himself to the bone just to catch up, both academically and socially.

“I was not aware your fidelity bond could harm you,” he says slowly. “I was under the impression only the parabatai bond did because it was corrupt.”

Has something gone wrong with the motherfucking fidelity bond? The notion makes Severus’ body tense. The price of something going wrong with that bond is far too bloody high.

“No,” Harrison sighs, running his hand through his curls. “He’s just ... not here.”

Severus does not have any consolation for that. Yet he knows something of that gnawing absence. *Lying in bed at night, staring at Lupin’s side of the bed, emptiness and longing seeping into his bones like a frost.*

“Sleep. You will feel better,” Severus says instinctively, remembering how Mrs Evans always used to say the same to him.

"Okay," Harrison sighs, throwing the contents of the vial down his throat and sticking out his tongue. “Yuck. Tastes like lavender.”

"It should do, it is a prominent ingredient," Severus vanishes the vial and instinctively moves to pull the duvet up over Harrison. He stops himself. These are actions of care and intimacy that Severus is only ever permitted when Harrison is dreaming, or in the state in between nightmares. He cannot imagine that Harrison will allow it now, but the boy merely rolls over, just as he does after a nightmare as if expecting Severus to raise the duvet to cover his shoulders. Holding his breath, Severus does. Nothing happens or is said. Harrison's breath is already evening out. He is sleeping. A minuscule miracle has taken place, an inch of trust in an area where previously it did not exist. Severus rises from where he is seated and looks down at the serpent, which blinks back at him, eyes fathomless.

"You are his familiar," Severus speaks quietly to the snake, feeling slightly ridiculous, even though he is certain that if the reptile can speak to Harrison then it must surely be able to understand Severus. "Made of his blood and his magic. You will guard him closer than I."

The creature blinks slowly and Severus does not know if it is in assent. Suddenly, there is a loud bang of a door being slammed open below, and a yell echoes up through the house.

"SEV!"

Severus' heart clenches with almost painful delight. He knows the wolf has come home.

Chapter End Notes

Just a wee reminder for those of you worried about Harry and Theo - It's a Nott/Pott fic. Romance is one of the central threads of the story and it is very important to me. However, I have another 500K words to explore that romance and I am committed to writing realistic portrayals of trauma because I believe it is disingenuous for me, as a person who lives with trauma to do otherwise. Healing is not linear. Mental illness is persistent and does not vanish overnight. People make mistakes as they struggle and flourish. Even if you do not enjoy this type of writing, I would ask you kindly not to make comments or speculate about me and my interpretation of trauma. Though feel free to rail at the characters when they are being dumb! (Because they can be!)

Harry is struggling in the fic right now, he will continue to struggle, but I promise there will be victories too and Theo will be at his side. I hope this assurance makes those who are worried or anxious feel a bit better, but if you are struggling with the tension of the book then I will suggest the same thing I did with the Plot Mountain chapters in part 1: wait until the work is complete to read it! I should be done sometime next year. Because if there is one thing I will never give up on in my writing, it's cliffhangers!

For those of you loving the journey and the twists and turns on it, for those of you who have been so supportive on discord, SO MUCH LOVE TO YOU ALL. <3

The Wolf Returns

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/child abuse)

This time, Severus and Remus catch up.
Next time, the Unit has guests.

Back on my regular update schedule from now, tuesdays and thursdays. (For other updates, check out my insta). So see you all on Tuesday!

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

Severus winces at the loud noise and checks the child, but he is burrowed under the duvet and does not stir. Severus sighs, picks up his wand and quickly descends, meeting Lupin on the second floor, just ascending the first flight. The wolf stops in his tracks, wand out, breathing heavily.

"Thank Merlin, is he here?" he demands.

"Hello," Severus drawls, folding his arms and looking at the wolf in amusement. "Why so harried? Did the elf not tell you?"

"Kreacher? No, Hermione just told me Harry said he was going home," Lupin stares up the staircase. "I assumed he meant here, but I didn't know, it could have been Skye but I know you're not in Skye, I didn't want him to be there alone -,"

Severus appreciates the wolf's worry but his mind is fixated on the news that Harrison told his best friend he was going *home* and came here. To Severus. There is a sensation inside Severus that he cannot account for but it is similar, oddly, to the first year he was friends with Lily and she gave him a Christmas present.

"-and then there's *this*," Lupin holds up a black and white photograph. Severus sees Harrison holding up a Black shield around himself and Griphook and looks like the picture of power, especially when the shield is protecting him from Albus. Severus cannot bear to think what the Dark Lord will do with this example of Harrison's power and sighs internally. "These are early proofs that the Contessa extracted from a photographer but he's only *one* paparazzo and there were more there, so they'll probably all run them tomorrow, if not tonight, and Harry will be *hounded* in Rome and this will just make everything *worse* and I've finally got him into some semblance of routine and I don't even know what he was doing with Albus apart from clearly fighting some kind of *fucking duel* and what kind of teacher duels his students -?"

"Lupin, he is here, he is sleeping," Severus says calmly. "He is safe."

Lupin stares at him.

"He is safe?" he repeats, amber eyes flicking up to the ceiling, nostrils flaring. Severus knows he is scenting out his child.

"Yes," Severus nods. "As for your other questions, our child was having a very ill-advised discussion with Albus and securing Magnus Bane as the next Steward of the House of Black."

By vowing to take himself back to the Dursleys, Severus adds, but he doesn't think this is something to speak of right at this moment, because Lupin's eyes have come to rest greedily on Severus' face, flickering over his clothes. Severus is certainly dressed more casually than he usually cares to. Lupin's eyes snag on his rolled-up sleeves, his unbuttoned collar, his hair tied back and his dusty hands. The wolf's pupils dilate. As for Lupin, he is uncharacteristically well-dressed in a fine, green robe over a white shirt and tweed suit, completely devoid of his usual shabbiness. Severus supposes even the Contessa has limits of how much like a baffled scholar Lupin can appear in Congregation sessions. He finds he does not hate the overall effect. But perhaps there is no effect that would deter him at this moment. *After all, it has been two weeks.*

"You have a brew that needs attention?" Lupin asks. He takes one slow step up, a hand still rested on the bannister. His eyes don't seem to want to leave Severus' neck, exposed with his hair pulled back from his face.

"In stasis," Severus says.

"Good." In three fast steps, Lupin has crossed the space between them and Severus is being pushed against the wall and kissed vigorously.

"He's sleeping?" Lupin murmurs, his hands cupping Severus' face.

"Yes," Severus answers breathlessly. "For the next five hours, at least."

Severus has been fucking a werewolf regularly for several months now, but he shall never be adequately prepared for the speed and strength of this particular werewolf when he is motivated. Lupin has forced his hands up inside Severus' shirt and is pressed against him before Severus can breathe, groan or think.

"Ambitious," Lupin gives him a feral grin. Severus tugs his hair in response.

"It is possible that in those five hours, we might actually find some time to sleep," Severus says drily. One of the things he has missed most about sleeping with Lupin is sleeping with Lupin.

"Unlikely," Lupin's words are whispered against Severus' neck, his nose seeking out skin that is normally hidden by Severus' hair, brushing against the curlier and coarser hair at the nape of his neck that has escaped the ribbon. Severus shivers. "You never wear it completely pulled back like this."

"You never wear robes like this," Severus gasps back, pushing them from Lupin's shoulders so that they pool onto the floor at their feet.

"I would very much like not to be wearing them at all," Lupin says with vibrant, needful eyes and a fist full of Severus' hair.

"Bedroom," Severus says, grabbing the lapels of Lupin's robes and dragging him as forcefully as he can into their bedroom, slamming the door behind them. Lupin wastes no time in gripping Severus' hips and pushing him hard against the closed door, his mouth biting and licking against Severus' neck, not caring that Severus' feet barely touch the floor.

"Wolf -," Severus gasps but punishing lips find him and swallow his words, a pair of amber, glowing eyes, silencing him with their ferocity. For a moment, Severus simply stares at them and then, something shifts inside Lupin's eyes. They become more orange, like the living flame of fire and all Severus needs to do is have his wand in his hand, which he does, and to think the word of the incantation and he has accepted Lupin's invitation into his mind. It is still the easiest legitimacy of his life, less like a spell he performs and more like an enchantment that Lupin draws him into. The charm of being mated to a werewolf, Severus supposes, and he eagerly dives into whatever awaits him inside his lover's mind. It's not one memory, but a series of flashes. *Lupin, working late in the Castello, watching the fireplace for letters and lurching to his feet when one dances through the floo, smiling when he sees Severus' handwriting. Lupin, rolling over in the night and stretching an arm across the empty bed, groaning with irritation when there is no one there. Lupin, standing in the shower, water pouring over his back with his forehead resting on the tiles, biting his bottom lip -*

"Remus," Severus whispers as he is thrown back out of his lover's mind with a gasp. He grabs his lapels to pull the wolf forward for a kiss which is half gratitude and half rebuke because *how dare* Remus show him such things without allowing him to see the whole memory? *Fucking sadist -*

"Two weeks, *cariad*," Lupin replies breathlessly. His hands are unbuttoning Severus' shirt, fingers naturally finding their way to Severus' runes, knowing as he does that this is where Severus is the most sensitive and that these touches are the ones that leave him breathless. Severus has made fast work of Lupin's waistcoat buttons and is undoing his shirt, eager for the sight of scarred skin that he knows so well and has missed so dearly. "Enough talking."

"Enough talking," Severus agrees. They have never really needed many words, after all. Especially not for this.

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"He's so powerful," Lupin mutters into Severus' neck, two hours later. "The pictures the photographers took ... He doesn't have half of his rings anymore, it shouldn't be possible -,"

"We know so little of what is possible for Mages," Severus sighs, shifting from where he is lying flat on the floor. They did not make it to the bed and he is not sad about it. They have a blanket draped across them and the scars on Lupin's back are shining in the last glow of the late afternoon sun as it streams through the window.

"But your mother, she must have had some knowledge -,"

"Only some," Severus can't help his abrupt tone. Talking about Eileen makes his spine stiffen.

"I don't mean to pry," Lupin's breath is warm against the scars across his clavicle. He lifts a warm finger to trace them and Severus can't help but shiver. "But he's our child and we know so little."

Severus sighs heavily, remembering his mother's library, the books still stacked in the cellar downstairs. He has begun to take them out, one by one, to examine and translate them with Narcissa's help, to seek out other ancient texts from his contact at the oldest British magical libraries, but he still finds himself lacking. Always lacking.

"We know so little," Severus repeats in a halting whisper. "Eileen knew barely a little more. Most of the knowledge in her small library was handwritten or inherited from my grandfather and obscure. Beyond that, there are so few texts from Merlin's time and Dee's library was ruined ... All of the research is into texts which have no correlative possibilities, no one text verifies another, it is simply an accumulation of stories that sometimes do me the great service of exploring similar themes -,"

"Like the collected myths of Ovid," Lupin murmurs and Severus is grateful for his quick mind.

"Precisely," Severus sighs. "There are no dates, there are even fewer names, there is folklore and conjecture and suggestions."

"And likely, very few handbooks on how to raise a teenage Mage," Lupin chuckles. Severus brushes his lips against Lupin's messy hair.

"None that I can find," he says. *Yet here we are, doing it anyway.*

"Do you know it happened?" Lupin whispers. "I mean, how do we have a Mage child? How ... how did you make him, Sev?"

This is too close to Severus' own thought when Harrison declared he was Severus' heir, that he would guard the Mages as part of his inheritance. *Lily, how did he come to be?*

"I did nothing." Severus tries not to sound affronted. It does not work.

"Mages don't come from nowhere," Lupin says, his words drowsy from their exertions. "Your mother built a conjuring circle into the earth to produce one. What was her theory?"

We need a Mage, Sev. I'm going to find one. Eileen's voice is in his head and Severus knows, somehow, that now is the moment that he speaks of this. It feels fitting, really, since after Eileen scarred him, Severus was convinced that no one would ever be attracted to him. Then, at twelve years old, Lupin kissed him in the Hogwarts library. *This is the man who wanted me first. This is the man who deserves this story.*

"Do you know what these scars are?" Severus' voice is small and painful. *How is it I cannot even speak of this without becoming ten years old?*

"They're ritualistic scars," Remus' fingers trace so lightly over them, with a gentleness that denies the firmness and strength that pushed Severus to the floor in the first place. Not that Severus minded for a second. "This is *Kenaz*, for fire and flame -,"

The bars, Severus thinks. The cage of flame.

"This is *Dagaz*, for dawn -,"

The weak light of the Samhain dawn coming in through the low cellar window. He wonders if this is the last dawn he will see.

“This is *Hagalaz*, for air -,”

Severus feels his breath slowing in his chest. Are these his last breaths, here on the cellar floor?

“This is *Logr*, for life energy -,”

“Just a bit further, Sev,” she whispers above him. Severus feels as if everything inside of him is being drawn out of him.

“This is *Raido*, the journey or the wheel.”

Severus remembers the darkness as it closes and the sensation, before it encloses him completely, of something inside him lifting up, moving on or back or through. Travelling.

“This is how she made it,” Severus whispers. “The cage.”

“She ... carved you?” Lupin tries to lift his head, no doubt to look into Severus’ face but Severus finds he cannot bear to see sympathy in those violent, amber eyes so he holds Lupin’s shoulders, encouraging him to stay rested against Severus’ chest and Lupin, who no doubt could happily throw him off if he wanted to, settles his head back down. “That’s barbaric, Sev.”

“Your astuteness knows no bounds,” Severus’ voice is drier than he thinks is possible. “She believed that if she used enough of the Prince blood, she could pull a Mage through the veil. She tried once previously, with herself, but once I came into my inheritance -”

“How old?” Lupin’s voice is brittle.

“My grandfather died when I was nine.”

“And this?” Lupin’s fingers trace the *Hagalaz* rune that sits right below the cleft in his throat.

“The year before Hogwarts.”

“And ... she needed all of your blood? Is that how it would theoretically work? With a certain level of blood potency?” Lupin’s voice sounds relievingly academic and Severus is grateful that he is choosing to focus on the practicalities of the enchantment rather than the fact that Eileen let him die in the cellar.

“It is how she theorised that it might work, bear in mind her theories were often lunacy,” Severus cannot stop the disparaging tone entering his voice. “The Princes believe that Mages are an accident of magic sparking through the veil, drawing powers of life and death and the space in between.”

“So she tried to create an accident,” Lupin’s voice is full of incredulity. “With your blood?”

“Well, her own had been ineffective,” Severus can’t stop the bitterness. “As was mine, in the end. I did not have ... enough.”

Even though she drained me and I do not know how I survived, I was still not able to give her what she wanted.

“Is it ... I mean, is it possible that it worked?” Lupin asks, leaning upwards and looking down on Severus. He cannot stop himself from running a hand through Lupin’s tousled blonde, gingery

locks. His hair is thinner than it was in 1982 and Severus does not care a bit. "After all, your blood did produce a Mage -,"

"Only in a very theoretical sense," Severus says. "In that I had a child who incidentally is a Mage."

"Perhaps it is not incidental," Lupin says. "Perhaps it is correlative."

"You want to assign providence to an accident of genetics just because my traumatised and likely schizophrenic mother tried to kill me once?" Severus raises his eyebrows. Lupin can say what he likes. It is unprovable and Severus will not believe it. *Harrison is extraordinary of his own accord, not because Eileen willed it so.*

"That is one way to describe a woman who enacted a Mage ritual which could be considered to have worked since it produced a Mage ten years after the fact," Lupin says.

"That is like saying those who wished for the Dark Lord's downfall in 1970 clearly brought it about, just because Harrison enabled it in 1980," Severus says waspishly. "It is daft."

"Except probably thousands wished for Voldemort's fall in 1970 and only your mother tried to produce a Mage," Lupin said pointedly, "and then her *son* did produce one."

"You forget, of course, that the circumstances of Harrison's conception were as far from wished for as anything could possibly be," Severus says drily.

"Perhaps that doesn't matter."

"Perhaps it does, perhaps it does not, you may as well talk of how the universe is made," Severus snaps, his impatience rising. *Does it matter how he came to be, as long as we keep him alive?* "It is a matter of faith, not fact."

"Actually, it's not," Lupin frowns down at him. "There was a primordial singularity."

"Caused by ...?"

"You're proposing that it is fate? That there is some omnipotent magical power with omniscient intent behind all of this?" Lupin snorts softly against his skin. His breath is warm.

"It is what Eileen believed, and you are the one wanting to assign providence to our child based on her actions," Severus says tartly. "If it is reasonable to assume Eileen had a hand in Harrison's conception then it is reasonable to assume Tobias also did since he oppressed her into a state of being that allowed her such magical creation. You might as well blame Hitler for arranging a war that he fought in that led him to such terrible alcoholism."

"It's reductionist to blame Hitler," Lupin says drolly. "It's like blaming Grindlewald for Voldemort."

"That is a reasonable correlation!" Severus exclaims, "whereas your theory of Eileen borders on predestination!"

"If there is predestination then God is the devil," Lupin's eyes glint in the way they always used to when he and Severus got into a debate.

"You are the one talking of theology," Severus shakes his head.

“Forgive me, I thought we were speaking of philosophy.” Lupin smiles shortly. “Is it possible you are becoming spiritual?”

Severus closes his eyes and sighs. For all that he and Lupin have the same voracity of mind, this is one area in which they differ. Although Severus has sought the same empiricism as Lupin all of his life, trusting in what he can touch and see and learn and cast and prove, although he has denied Eileen’s beliefs about Mages as absurdity and has been long ago cured of belief in any kind of divinity, he believes Harrison. He believes in Death. He hopes for a chance to see Lily again. He believes there is a connection to his son and something ... more.

“Harrison saw Black beyond the veil,” Severus says softly. Lupin stiffens in his arms and then he lets out a long sigh.

“I know,” Lupin whispers. “He told me Sirius is with James.”

Severus cannot tell if this was a kind or abominably unkind thing to say.

“And?”

“Are you asking if I believe him?” Lupin rests a curious, solemn pair of eyes on Severus. “The veil is a magical execution portal. I don’t know what the Unspeakables know about it, but the method of the magical death penalty in the United States reportedly enchants the victim to see someone precious to them as they die. It doesn’t explain why Harry survived but it does explain why he would see ...”

Lupin’s voice trails off. Severus remembers Harrison’s desperation that forced him to use a compulsion on Severus earlier. *Do you believe me? Tell the truth!*

“The child thinks it is real,” Severus says. *So do I.*

“I know,” Lupin’s voice is heavy with sadness. “Grief is complicated. That’s okay. He’s ... doing what he needs to do.”

“You do not find ... comfort in the notion that they wait for us?” Severus whispers into the top of Lupin’s head. He does not need to say their names. After all, there are so many names he could say.

“No,” Lupin whispers back bleakly. “It is too cruel to wait.”

He wouldn’t get it, that’s what Harrison said about his godfather and Severus knows why. This is the shape that Lupin’s grief needs to take. Whilst Severus takes comfort in the notion that there may be other, better, final meetings and that there might be forgiveness, Lupin takes comfort in knowing that since there is no more consciousness then there is no more suffering. Severus is suddenly proud of his son for seeing Lupin accurately and for understanding his current limitations. It is no wonder that Harrison has decided to keep this part of himself a secret for now so Severus will not speak of it any further before Harrison decides it is time. Besides, it gives him more opportunities to decide exactly how he can craft the statement "there is a tangible magical embodiment of Death that our son frequently communicates with" into something that Lupin will be able to accept. He turns the conversation back to easier subjects.

“To talk of Mages is to talk of spirituality,” Severus says softly. “We cannot know what makes them, it brings us to the question of where Magic comes from, to begin with.”

“It’s genetic,” Lupin nestles his lips against one of Severus’ runes. Severus feels the hairs rise up on his arms.

“If it is only genetic then we could isolate the gene that allowed a muggleborn and a half-blood to produce a Mage,” Severus says. “We could predict the instances of Muggleborn wixen and yet we cannot.”

After all, who could have predicted Hermione bloody Granger?

“Maybe we can, maybe we could do all of that if Wixen thought to apply themselves to the Big Bang Theory or to genetic research,” Lupin says thoughtfully. “Magnus was made, after all. A half Mage, produced by a Mage, a Wixen and a Daemon. They must have done something. It’s an option to consider.”

“I have considered many options since my child proved himself to be a Creature of mythic proportions,” Severus mumbles. He can feel tiredness scratching behind his eyes. “We should move to the bed.”

Lupin groans.

“Move, wolf,” Severus gently pinches the thin skin on his side. Like Harrison, his wolf is still too thin. Perhaps another adaption to the wolfsbane potion is needed. *Something with a metabolism suppressant.* “My knees cannot withstand sleeping on the floor.”

“Oh, but they can handle endless rounds of cruciatus curse?” Lupin raises an eyebrow at Severus sardonically. “What illegal supplements has Narcissa been giving you?”

“Never you mind,” Severus says. “I’m not sharing.”

“Rude,” Lupin mutters, in a very good impression of Harrison so Severus snorts with laughter, reaching up to cover his mouth. Lupin smiles at him widely and runs a finger down Severus’ nose. “You laugh the same way you did when you were thirteen.”

“I imagine most people do,” Severus says. Lupin shakes his head.

“No, you cover your mouth,” Lupin’s finger traces Severus’ lips. “Like you did when we studied in the library.”

And before that, when Lily would make me laugh and I would be afraid Tobias would hear me. Severus swallows down those memories and gives Lupin another pinch.

“To bed,” he says softly and Lupin groans, but rises, naked and glorious, to stumble across the dusty floorboards and flop into the bed. Severus cannot help but smile. He rises, the blanket wrapped around him and shuffles to his side of the bed, lowering himself onto it carefully with a sigh. Lupin watches him, amber eyes following him intently whilst his body is as still as a hunter. *A wolf.*

“You’re beautiful,” Lupin says quietly as if the thought merely occurred to him.

“You are sleep deprived,” Severus rolls his eyes and rearranges the blanket over both of them.

“Twenty-three years and he still can’t take a compliment,” Lupin mutters, closing his eyes. Severus rolls onto his side to look at the werewolf, to notice the bags under his eyes and the sharpness of his

cheekbones. The moon is at the end of the month. Severus has time to adapt the potion again. He's been brewing it for twenty-two years, ever since he found out about Lupin's lycanthropy. *There is still time to get it right. There is still time.*

"Go to sleep," Severus whispers, stroking Lupin's shoulder.

"You too, *cariad*," Lupin whispers back, so Severus does.

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He wakes, abruptly, because the Dark Mark is itching. He wakes with the knowledge that likely, somewhere, someone (hopefully Bellatrix) is being tortured for the Dark Lord's enjoyment. The sun has set. He rolls over to dig out some salve from his bedside cabinet in the semi-darkness and hears Lupin stir behind him.

"Mark?" Lupin mumbles sleepily.

"Yes." Severus finds the salve and pulls it out, smearing it over the twitching tattoo.

"It seems the height of unpleasantness to have a branding system that he uses not only to torture his servants but to wake them up from slumber in the midst of torturing someone else," Lupin comments drowsily. "Do you think he intended that or is it a side effect of the spell?"

"I think he's a motherfucking son of a bitch," Severus says, flexing his fingers. He hears Lupin snort with laughter.

"And here I thought he was just misunderstood," Lupin says sarcastically. Severus smiles and smears on more balm.

"I can reliably inform you that the only thing people misunderstand about the Dark Lord is that he does, in fact, utterly despise onions."

"Excuse me?" Lupin splutters. It is a kind of wonder, Severus thinks, being able to make Remus Lupin laugh so freely.

"It's true," Severus smirks to himself and watches the mark calm down. *Perhaps Bellatrix is dead.* Severus finds that to be a very enjoyable thought. "As a person from a middle-Eastern heritage, I can factually say that is reason enough to brand him psychotic."

Lupin laughs and tugs Severus back down into the warmth of the bed covers.

"What time is it?" Lupin mumbles into Severus' bare shoulder. Severus looks at the clock on the bedside table.

"Midnight," Severus feels a little thrill of victory. "He hasn't woken."

"Your brew was a success then," Lupin kisses Severus' back. "That's something."

"It is."

Severus will take triumphs where he can get them.

“You said we needed to talk about Harry and Voldemort,” Lupin whispers.

Severus sighs. He’s been having such a pleasant evening that he is loathed to bring it up, but he does. He recounts, briefly, his conversation with the Dark Lord. When he is finished, Lupin is silent. Severus says nothing. He can feel from the grip of werewolf fingers on his waist that Lupin is controlling whatever wolf urge is trying to send him hunting down the Dark Lord and ripping him apart with his bare hands.

“We have to tell Harry,” Lupin says, finally.

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No,” Severus didn’t know he would answer this way, but he finds he is convicted about it. “I am the occlumens, I am ... the servant. I should tell him. Help him.”

If I even can, Severus thinks, bleakly.

“If anyone can help him, it’s you,” Lupin says, lips brushing against Severus’ skin and Severus is surprised by his uncanny ability to follow Severus’ line of despairing thinking. “You’ve always been an Occlumens and a Legilimens. Hardly anyone just grows up like that, you’re one of a kind.”

“Perhaps not,” Severus muses. “Harrison has a natural aptitude that is unlike anything I could ever expect.”

“Occlumency and trauma,” Lupin yawns. “Perhaps they’re connected.”

Severus doesn’t like it as a theory but he can’t immediately fault it. This is why Lupin has always been such an excellent scholar, he sees the connections that other people miss.

“Perhaps.”

He can’t help yawning grudgingly into his pillow. When the wolf begins to stroke his hair, he feels his eyes drooping again.

“Or perhaps he’s just like his father,” Lupin whispers. It takes a second for Severus to realise he is not talking about Potter.

“I am not that,” Severus says. Black’s words will always linger with him: *you can wish it away all you want, Snivellus, but Harry knows the truth. You’re a bad person. He’ll never call you his father, not in a million years.* “You are more than I.”

Severus feels Lupin hesitate, feels his breath catch against the back of Severus’ neck.

“Speak, Lupin,” Severus says wearily.

“He called me his Creature father,” Lupin whispers. “Creature father for a Creature child, he said.”

It does not sting as Severus expects it to. Instead, it only warms a part inside of him that is weary and worried. *The Creature father of his Creature son. A unit.* A part of him also viciously rejoices, because he did tell Black this would happen. Now Lupin is a father and Black is dead and Severus is right. *I can live with all of those things.*

“That is appropriate,” Severus whispers back, twisting his neck around to catch the dry corner of Lupin’s lips to reassure him. “For you are a Creature.”

“And you are an enigma,” Lupin chuckles gently. Severus feels a warm finger tracing softly against his *Kenaz* rune. “With an enigma child.”

“And we are a unit,” Severus mumbles.

“Yes,” Lupin laughs silently against Severus’ shoulder blade. “I suppose we are still calling it that.”

Severus sighs and shuffles back into the warm circle of Lupin’s body heat. It is only when he is drifting towards sleep that he ever allows himself this small tenderness, a moment to pretend that perhaps, possibly, they are not doomed by the crushing inevitability of what this war will bring. His memories may still be sore and sharp and the mark on his arm might still itch but this softness, Lupin’s weight and warmth and scent, helps. Lupin helps and he can pretend, for a moment, that it is not dreadfully unlikely that they will both survive.

-- -- --

Harry doesn't dream.

It is good.

He stands in an empty space and is quiet.

But he is not alone.

You are never alone, Harry.

Red eyes and a red voice that he can hear and feel but not see because somehow, he's still alone. There's no pain or fear like there was before. It's because the voice is inside him. It is not separate, it is not different, it is within him, it is always within him. It's not like when Tom is there, suddenly, in his waking moments, violent and slippery, slithering into his thoughts. This is different. This is the persistent hum of something vivid and green, deep inside of him that he can never get out.

You are mine, little weapon.

Harry longs for his dreams. Longs for escape from himself and the voice made of red eyes and green light but there isn't one, there's just emptiness and the voice. There's no escape and Harry is trapped. Trapped again. Trapped and weak.

I would make you strong.

Harry cannot speak back, he has no mouth, no words, and is wrapped in tight scales of a monster made of green light and screeching, but he knows he should reject it. He should say no. He does not want to be made strong by the voice. He does not want someone to save him. The laugh is high and horribly familiar.

We both know that is not true, Harry.

Harry screams. Harry screams because the voice is right. Harry screams because they both know it. They are one.

Yes, Harry. We are one.

Harry screams. When he opens his eyes, all he sees is sky.

-- -- --

Hours later, as if the universe plans all interruptions when they are least wanted, a concert of sounds reaches Severus' ears. The sound of the bed creaking on the floor above them and the sound of someone knocking very abruptly on the door of Spinners End. Harrison is awake and someone, some imbecile, is knocking on the front door.

“What time is it?” Lupin groans next to him.

Severus rouses from where he has been drowsing against Lupin's chest and looks blearily at the clock.

"Four," Severus croaks, climbing out of bed and fumbling for his trousers.

"Who the fuck knocks at four?" Lupin grumbles. He looks utterly fantastic, mostly bare and pale and sated against the sheets, lit by the golden glow of a streetlamp. Lupin looks up at him through slitted eyes, a flash of amber questioning.

"I, to the child," Severus commands because it is too tempting to climb back into the bed. "You, to the door."

Lupin nods wearily. Severus grabs a very old black knitted jumper that had, once upon a time, belonged to Mr Evans. It had been gifted to Severus, far too big in size, one summer in the year when he and Lily were officially a couple. He had never dropped around to return it, or perhaps he had intentionally held it back, not wanting to part with something else of Lily and the Evans family when she herself had disappeared from his life. *I should perhaps gift it to Harrison.* Lupin pauses in doing the button on his trousers to stare at it.

"That looks like a Mrs Evans creation," Lupin says, eyes creasing with soft sadness and memory.

"The finest," Severus says shortly, opening the door and climbing up the stairs, turning it into a run when he hears a scream. He knows that scream. It is the scream of a nightmare, though Severus has no idea how it is possible that the child could have a bloody dream when he was given enough dreamless sleep potion to knock Hagrid out until Sunday.

"Sev?" Lupin calls anxiously behind him, just as the knocking on the front door increases in volume and intensity.

"The door!" Severus shouts over his shoulder, throwing open the attic room door as he does. His stomach flips when he sees an empty bed and even more painfully when he sees an open window. There is a crack and Kreacher is suddenly there, snarling as he clambers onto the windowsill.

"Master moves through the air in his sleep," the elf growls.

"Where?" Severus demands, feeling panic begin to set into his limbs. *Could be anywhere. Could be at Hogwarts. Could be at the top of Blackpool Tower.*

"The roof," Kreacher swings the window open further and sticks his head out. "DESPAIR IS IGNOBLE!"

With a lurch, Severus sees a figure standing on the slanting edge of the roof of Spinners End. They are three floors up. It is not enough of a fall to kill an adolescent, but Severus has no desire to set any more of his child's bones.

"Move," Severus snaps, brushing the elf aside and clambering awkwardly through the round window onto the sharp incline of the roof. He feels distinctly undignified as he sits heavily down, cursing under his breath and sliding ignobly down until his slippered feet catch in the mulch of leaves gathered in the drainpipe. He is within the grasp of the child and reaches up for his sleeve, just catching the rolled-back cuff of the white shirt. "Sit, Harrison."

Harrison is staring at the sky, still inky dark with hints of dawn on the horizon, his entire body tense. Severus tries to crane his body forward, resisting the downward pull of the sloping roof, attempting to discern if the child's eyes are full of that terrifying inky blackness that overtakes him in dreams or when he is working the Black magic. His eyes are green and glassy and he is furiously

biting his bottom lip, his hands clenched into rigid fists that tremble, especially the left, unable to hold such a grip for long. He has no idea where the serpent is, but clearly his familiar is away hunting. *Idiot serpent, I told you to watch him!* Severus does not know what has happened, he does not understand how a child can have a nightmare inside a dreamless sleep potion, but he knows Harrison is burning with rage and if the elf has his assessment right, despair. It is a potentially dangerous combination and one all too familiar to Severus. He tightens the tethers between them and shifts his hand so he is gripping Harrison's wrist.

"Sit, *farzandam*," he commands. The word seems to get through. Harrison does. Abruptly, slightly dazedly, turning to look at Severus with eyes that don't seem to quite be present. Severus is stuck with a horrible thought. *Could he be sleepwalking?* Severus does not know what to do, so he tries, for a brief moment, to channel the wolf. He lifts a hesitant hand and brushes the boy's sweaty curls back from his furrowed brow. When his touch is met with no wincing or flinching, he turns his palm upwards and presses the stone of the Prince ring against Harrison's cheek. He allows the cold shadows to caress the boy and Harrison shudders, closing his green, vague eyes. "Speak, child."

"I ... I don't want to be like him," Harrison whispers hoarsely.

"Like whom?" Severus prompts.

"Tom," Harrison's glassy eyes open, and his face twists to stare into the oncoming dawn.

"Did you dream of him?" Severus asks. Perhaps it is something about the child's power, that his mind can overcome the Dreamless Sleep even when Severus has enhanced it almost to the point of being able to put any normal person in a coma. Severus bleakly wonders; would Harrison dream even under the draught of living death?

"No," Harrison shakes his head. "I didn't, it was worse, I ... I don't want to take that potion anymore."

"You don't have to," Severus says placatingly. "If you did not dream of him then ..."

"I don't need to dream of him," Harrison chokes. "He's just always there, he's always ...with me."

Severus feels crushing anxiety then. This is not what the Dark Lord experiences, he only enters Harrison's consciousness in flashes. *How can Harrison's experience be so different?* He is reminded suddenly of how a strand of Harrison's hair had led Narcissa in her scrying to the Dark Lord. *Do you understand the intimate connection between the Dark Lord and your son?* Severus knows, he has known for a long time now, that whatever joins his child and the monster he serves cannot be overcome by normal occlumency. Nor by an intensified Dreamless Sleep potion, apparently.

"Just because you are ... connected does not mean you are the same as him," Severus says quietly.

"I don't want to be like him," Harrison repeats, rocking slightly, his socks pressed against the lead tiles of the roof. His hand moves to the rubber band on his wrist and begins to flick it, insistently. On the one hand, Severus is glad that one of the techniques he researched is being used, on the other, seeing his child's urges in action is disconcerting. He is grateful that Lupin has been the one managing it every day. "I don't want him to touch me, I don't want him to know me, or think about me or understand me -."

"Understand you?" Severus latches onto the one that is the most disconcerting. "In what way?"

Severus is haunted by the Dark Lord's words: *I know his darkest secret already.*

Harrison groans lowly and drops his head towards his knees, his hands digging into the back of his neck. For a second, Severus is struck by how young his hands still look. *Still growing.*

"He wants me," Harrison's voice is dark and bitter. "He wants to keep me and I can't get his voice out of my fucking head, and he promised -,"

"What did he promise?" Severus almost bites out the words. Harrison has never used the word 'promise' about the Dark Lord before. He has said the Dark Lord has lied to him, and undoubtedly this promise would be a lie, yet Harrison is not calling it so. It makes Severus suddenly feel as if he might vomit. He stares at his child, whose face he cannot see, ducked between his knees. Severus knows that if Harrison lies to him now then they are all lost. The Dark Lord will have him, just as he has predicted he will. The Dark Lord's words are a taunt inside Severus' mind: *He knows what I offer him is far greater than what Albus ever could.*

"He promised never to send me to war again," Harrison's voice is barely above a whisper. Severus is so relieved that he has spoken and it is not a lie that for a moment he does not hear the horror of the words. Then he does. The Dark Lord has offered Harrison the only thing that the Dark Lord can uniquely provide. He has indeed offered him the one thing Albus never would and if Harrison surrenders, he does not have to fight. Severus would consider it an ingenious manipulation if he did not feel like he was choking down the instinct to commit murder. Or take his child to another planet.

"Anything else?" Severus asks because he knows, oh, how he knows, the Dark Lord's honeyed words are made of many promises.

"He promised that he'd make me strong. That I wouldn't be broken anymore. That he would keep me safe," Harrison whispers, and the longing in his voice nearly ruins Severus.

"He would keep you caged," Severus says, as neutrally and factually as he can but it is not enough, because the green eyes that twist to glare at him are full of venom.

"I know!" Harrison growls furiously. "Don't you think I know he's a fucking liar?"

"Harrison, try not to lose yourself in your anger," Severus decides the best course of action is to be honest. "He can feel your anger."

"I know he fucking can!" Harrison yells. "You think I don't hear his voice? He's so *happy* sliding in there at my worst fucking moments -,"

"He seeks to control you through your anger," Severus says levelly. "He told me."

Harrison stares at him for a moment, a long moment, and then lets out a shuddering breath.

"It's just when I'm angry?" Harrison asks, voice brittle with tension. "It's not like before when he could - could just look into my mind and send me shit?"

"No, he experiences too much pain in your mind after the ministry," Severus says. Harrison snorts.

"*He* experienced pain when he possessed *me*?" Harrison shakes his head. "Fucking wimp."

Severus can't help a small snort of derision. He is absolutely certain no one has ever referred to the Dark Lord as a wimp before and is funnily proud that his son is the one to do so. It seems to have been the right thing to do though because Harrison throws him a grateful glance and rubs his trembling left hand over his face. His anger seems to be dissipating and Severus is very grateful. *The last thing he needs is the Dark Lord in his mind.*

"He offered me an out," Harrison carries on, his voice more level, almost wistful. "That's easy to say no to, especially when he's got me at the end of his fucking wand on the floor, and other people have offered me outs, right? You did, then him, then Bill, then Hermione -,"

To be explained later, Severus thinks in irritation, since surely no one consulted him about offering to spirit his only child away from the war.

"- and I turned them all down, and I don't feel weird about any of them but then he offered it and I said no but ..." Harrison's voice trails away. He begins to bite his lip again. Realisation dawns on Severus, shaking off the final dregs of sleep. Severus understands, suddenly, perhaps the deepest roots of his child's self-loathing.

"but you think about it," Severus says softly. "You wish that you had taken his offer."

Harrison lets a sound that is somewhere between a choked sob and a bitter laugh.

"Because he could do it, right?" Harrison sniffs, rubbing his nose against his trousers and setting his chin on his knees, green eyes fixed on the light blue and pinkish glow beginning to build behind the spectre of the old mill. "I know Tom. When he wants something ..."

"Yes," Severus feels like he wants to lie, but he knows that to lie at this moment would be unforgivable. "The Dark Lord can grant many boons. Know this, *farzandam*. None of them are free."

"I know," Harrison closes his eyes for a moment. "But then I would be dead and I wouldn't care."

This is as much a suicidal wish as the muggles who would throw themselves over the top of the trenches without weapons in the Second World War, that Tobias often regaled Severus about when drunk. Severus understands it perfectly. Harrison has been lucky, Severus thinks bleakly, in this one small way. Due to the Dark Lord's special excitement with his murder, he has never had to consider much the fates worse than death at the Dark Lord's hand. It's time for Severus to provide this specialised enlightenment.

"The cost would not be your life, not in the way you think," Severus fixes his own eyes on the beginning sunrise. He finds he does not want to watch his child's face when he speaks of this. "It would be your life in a thousand other worse ways. The Dark Lord takes pleasure in possession."

"I know," Harrison snorts.

"No, you do not," Severus corrects. "Not in possession of a body. The Dark Lord creates possessions of those around him, of those he covets. He would have no pleasure in your death. But in watching you suffer and despair and weaken, in watching you become a shell -,"

"I wouldn't," Harrison says dully. Severus knows he is not convinced. Maybe he has thought about it. *Maybe he doesn't care anymore.* Severus feels a lurch of fear and helplessness at the increase in his child's suicidal feelings.

"You would," Severus stares at pink streaks in the cloud, like blood leeches into water. "Slowly. It comes slowly. In the taking of other lives, in the death of your friends and loved ones, in the constant subjugation and torture of the mind. Those that love the Dark Lord do not love him without self-loathing at what their love has transformed them into."

"Not unless they're Bellatrix," Harrison mutters. "Or Barty Crouch Junior. Fucking nutters."

Severus could not agree more.

"How he hates them both," Severus murmurs. "How he hates all things that bow before him."

"You're saying that's why he's so weird with me?" Harrison frowns, "because I, like, refuse to bow?"

It is such a simple, teenage interpretation of the complex chaotic and deadly narcissism that surrounds the Dark Lord that Severus fights the urge to laugh. Or weep. For it is brutally accurate. How much differently might the Dark Lord think of Harrison if he had displayed fear rather than derision and defiance? Yet that train of thought is like asking if the Dark Lord would want Harrison less if he were not Harrison, for years and years of living in an abusive home has baked defiance into Harrison's bones. Severus once foolishly thought it was arrogance and impudence, no doubt the Dark Lord finds it amusing and thrilling. They did not and do not see the truth of the boy simply fighting for his own survival. For all these reasons, Severus knows he must never gloss over the Dark Lord's interest when speaking to Harrison. It would be not only unfair but unjust to the boy who has survived so much.

"Yes," Severus says simply. "The Dark Lord loves nothing, but challenge excites him. The hunt of it. Yet once something is caught, it never retains its glamour."

"Mrs Figg has a cat like that," Harrison mumbles. "Always messing with the birds but when it catches and maims them, doesn't give a piss. Then it leaves them on the back doorstep to die. Petunia hates it."

Severus wishes for a moment that he had a pensive to hand to perfectly preserve this moment in which his child referred to the Dark Lord as a precocious feline. Minerva would be outraged.

"Yes," he tries not to smile, but perhaps he cannot help the small tug at the corner of his mouth. After all, the child is very, very funny. "The Dark Lord is precisely like a cat."

Harrison's eyes shoot up and catch his, first with a flash of suspicion that always appears whenever Severus says something, then the single scarred eyebrow lifts in surprise and then, Severus is sure he sees a tiny flush of pride when Harrison realises he is not being made fun of and perhaps, just perhaps, Severus has found what he said amusingly. Then the boy slowly grins.

"Should we get him one of those feathers on a string?" Harrison chuckles. "What do cats who are dicks like?"

"Minerva has always been fond of a ball of yarn," Severus says flatly and Harrison actually snorts with laughter at the implication, clapping a hand over his mouth, sparkling eyes fixed on Severus. "Or a teacup left unattended on the edge of a table."

"I knew it!" Harrison exclaims, sitting upright and grinning at Severus broadly. "I was in the library researching for the first task and I left a cup of tea on the desk -,"

"Undoubtedly," Severus nods, privately elated at his son's sudden improvement in mood.

"Christ on a broom," Harrison shakes his head, smiling to himself. "It must be cool to be an animagus."

"No," Severus says abruptly.

"What?" Harrison turns wide, innocent eyes on him but Severus is not fooled.

"No, you will not attempt to become an underage animagus," Severus says sharply. "No."

"I wasn't -!"

"No."

"Harry! Severus!" They both turn towards the sound of Lupin's voice on the staircase. "Could you join us?"

"Us?" Harrison asks, catching Severus' eye.

"We must have guests," Severus says.

"At this time in the morning?" Harrison frowns at the sky. "That can't be good."

"Indeed," Severus says wryly. He hesitates, looking at his son's fingers as they pluck rhythmically at the rubber band on his wrist. "Do you need to count? Or ... recite something?"

"The broomstick servicing manual," Harrison says. *Merlin, save me from that*, Severus thinks but he nods firmly.

"Would it be ... beneficial?"

"No, I don't think I want to ..." Harrison frowns and rubs his chest, the spot where the fidelity bond was causing him pain. Severus frowns at it. *What the hell kind of potion can I brew for that?* "Can you just ... can you tell me something about ... anything? Like, about here?" Harrison gestures over the landscape. "I'll .. I'll just do the breathing thing."

Harrison flushes when he says it as if he is worried about sounding foolish, but Severus is fiercely proud. *He is learning how to manage his feelings of being overwhelmed.* He nods without fanfare, and looks over the grey landscape, pointing gently to the mill.

"It was a cotton mill in the 19th Century, back when the area was more prosperous," Severus begins. "After that, it was used for factory space. Tobias worked there when I was young. They made engineering parts. That river once fed the cotton mill. People fished there in my childhood, and now people dump rubbish there."

Beside him, Severus can hear his child's breathing, can hear it slowing with every word he speaks. It is powerfully hopeful, Severus realises, in the wake of seeing his son's profound mental distress to now see how one of the small things Severus has been teaching him is helping him cope. *He will live, Lily, I swear it.* Severus goes on.

"Those woods once belonged to a stately home that used to stand where the supermarket is. They knocked it down when I was five. The owner died and had no heirs and it was turned over to the

council. When Lily and I were children, we used to play there. There's a willow tree that she loved."

"Is it still there?" Harrison asks quietly.

"It may be." Severus has never had the heart to check but maybe visiting the woods with Harrison would not be so bad. Perhaps there could be freedom in it. "Do you feel ready to go in?"

"Yes."

Harrison rises gingerly to his feet and Severus finds himself automatically holding out his hand for the child to take, not realising immediately how the gesture is one usually reserved for infants in strife. Severus feels a flush of irritation at his own presumption and humiliation and attempts to withdraw his hand. *Utterly foolish, the child is fifteen, not five.* Yet, astonishingly, the boy grips his hand tightly. When Severus glances at him in amazement he sees how Harrison's eyes are focused on the slippery surface of the tiles underneath them, his slightly too big green and silver socks (which Severus thinks can only be borrowed from Theodore's trunk) struggling to grip the tiles. Harrison has barely noticed how his left hand is trembling inside Severus' firm grip as he pushes down against Severus' weight to leverage his way up the slope. Severus helps him, trying not to silently marvel or to imagine how, when Harrison was truly five years old, he could have been an infant trustingly taking Severus' hand. *If Lily had told me. If I had known. Circe, why didn't you tell me, Lily?* Once Harrison has scrambled up onto the window ledge, he releases Severus' hand. Kreacher is standing on the bed under the window, his small arms crossed, wearing Harrison's serpent around his neck and a huge frown on his saggy forehead. Clearly, the familiar has returned. Severus spares a scowl for it. *Where were you?*

"Kreacher meant it last time Master was melancholy on a roof," the elf snarls. "Kreacher will not stop him if he falls or jumps."

"The last time?" Severus asks, eyebrows raised. Harrison only blushes, jumping over the crumpled up duvet with all of that annoying superiority of a natural athlete whilst Severus clambers awkwardly back to solid ground. Harrison looks at the snake and hisses at her, nodding as she hisses back and slips off Kreacher's shoulders, heading for the open window. Severus watches her go. "I thought she had already hunted?"

"No, she was asleep under the bed, she likes to eat the mice." Harrison points to the window. "Hedwig's here now. They like to hunt together in the early morning, before it's properly light."

Severus sees a swoop of white wings past the window, glowing in the grey air, and nods before gesturing to the stairs.

"I did not know we had mice," Severus says.

"Well, we don't," Harrison smirks. "Sahara eats them."

Harrison sets off and they are halfway down the first flight of stairs when Harrison abruptly turns to look up at him with curious eyes.

"What you said about Voldemort taking your life in a thousand other ways ... that was about you, right?" Harrison asks. Severus nods, mutely. He sees an odd resolve click into place behind Harrison's eyes but does not know what it means. He has no time to query it as the child is walking

down the stairs and Severus is following him, curiosity peaked, until the child stops short in the middle of the last flight of stairs, gazing intently into the living room.

"No way," the child whispers. Severus looks over the child's head at the assortment of people in his living room. The wolf, obviously, looking unhelpfully delicious and absurd in his tweed trousers from last night and a soft t-shirt. Then there is Weasley, who is clad in leather and seems to be sitting amongst an assortment of muggle tote bags with a frown on his face. Additionally, sitting in Severus' favourite chair, with new silver streaks in his hair and a glittery jacket that looks like snakeskin with that horrible ugly coloured trunk at his feet, Magnus Bane, once again, in his living room.

Holy Merlin, not again.

Severus scowls at him. It would not be right to take glee in Bane's near death at Black's hand, but it would also be a lie to say Severus has missed him.

"Why are you all in my house at four in the morning?" Severus asks. Harrison is rubbing his eyes and staring at Bane like he's a dream. *Or my nightmare.*

"Because Ward nearly caused a diplomatic disaster yesterday," Weasley says sharply. He does not look like he's slept.

"Is it four am?" Bane grins at Severus carelessly. "Forgive me, I'm still on New York time."

"Are you here under some new role for the Clave?" Severus unconsciously places his hand on his son's shoulder, just to make sure. After all, someone has pretended to be Bane to kidnap the child once before. "If it is still illegal for you to be on British soil, then I shall not offer sanctuary."

"Severus, you wound me, I would not hesitate to give a wayward Briton solace in Brooklyn," Bane says, rolling his pink kohl-outlined eyes.

"I remember," Severus says tartly, a quiet flicker of rage for remembrance of Regulus. "Answer the question. I don't suppose you are here to steal the wolf's job back from him?"

Lupin snorts from the kitchen, where he is boiling the kettle and seems to not want to meet Severus' gaze for some reason.

"Oh, how you take the fun out of absolutely everything," Magnus sighs. He flickers his fingers and Severus notices a ring on his finger that Severus would bet had not been there before. It is too simple for Magnus' tastes and has the engraving of the House of Black upon it.

"Is that -?" Severus asks.

"Yes, he's the Steward of the House of Black, not Dumbledore, and that's why we need to talk," Weasley says, his jaw tense.

"Mags?" the child whispers. Severus can feel a strange heat coming off the child as Bane's eyes fix fondly on Harrison.

"Mr Potter, I did say I'd be back," Bane says, with a soft playfulness. Then he inclines his head gently, eyes sparkling. "My apologies, *Lord Black*. I am ever at your service."

"Really?" Harrison's voice is excruciatingly small and hopeful. He does not expect this, Severus realises, for people to honour their word to him, especially when it comes to returning. *He does not expect people to come back to him.*

"Bane is not lying, *farzandam*, " Severus mutters quietly in Harrison's ear. It seems to be the words that Harrison needs to hear because he unfreezes and, in a flicker of a moment, is across the room, hugging Bane impossibly hard. Severus is not sure if he flew or if he apparated but quickly follows and joins Lupin in the kitchen. The wolf is slamming mugs down on the counter and glaring at Severus.

"Yes?" Severus mutters.

"The Dursleys?" Lupin snarls, throwing tea bags into cups. "You didn't tell me?"

"I didn't tell you *yet*."

Lupin snarls and rips the top off the tea bag caddy with a ferocious glare. Severus sighs and looks at Weasley, who looks just as furious.

"We need to talk," Weasley repeats.

"Coffee first," Severus says.

Bane gestures a finger and a bottle of whisky appears on the counter beside them.

"Make mine an Irish, Professor Snape," Bane grins.

"It is four am!" Severus hisses, glaring back as his child snorts with laughter.

"Oh, how foolish of me," Bane smiles. "Make mine a double, then."

Bane has not stopped hugging Severus' son and the child looks absurdly happy. Severus feels a flicker of second-hand relief, a softening in the tether around his wrist. His child is happy Bane has returned and for that, at least, Severus can be grateful. He wearily unscrews the cap of the bottle and pushes it towards Lupin. He feels like this is going to be a very tedious day.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

The Return of Magnus Bane

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (child abuse/suicidal ideation/depression)

This time, Magnus is back and Bill has opinions.

Next time, a visitor arrives at Spinner's End and Harry proceeds to have yet another typically abnormal day.

Those who are freaking out over Theo and Harry, I suggest you wait until Chapter 23 is posted. Not long to go, but that will ease some of the tension and anxiety you are having over their relationship. Chapter 23 will be posted Thursday next week.

A little note on pacing - this is a long book. It might seem like I am taking a long time examining Harry's grief and how it impacts his relationship with Theo (and vice versa) but in terms of the whole book, it works out at being only about 20% (maybe less) of the narrative. And that 20% will be completed by the end of next week.

Thank you to everyone who has been so incredibly supportive! Those of you in the discord Department of Spoilers channel, you make my days so fucking bright. Thank you.

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

Severus and Remus are at the beginning of a fight but Harry doesn't give a shit because Magnus is here. Magnus is here, alive, Harry can hear his heartbeat in his ears.

"All well, little Mage?" Magnus whispers against Harry's ear, so only he can hear. Harry shakes his head and snorts softly, his face pressed into Magnus' leather jacket.

"Not even a little bit," Harry mutters. Magnus squeezes him closer.

" - I cannot believe you said *nothing* -, " Remus is growling.

"We were preoccupied, if you recall -, " Severus snarks back.

"With what, I wonder?" Magnus whispers cheekily into Harry's hair.

"Ew, don't," Harry mumbles into Magnus' chest. He will not think about Severus and Remus, not under any circumstances. Magnus snorts with laughter.

"I was not told either," Bill snaps. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees Bill folding his arms in irritation. "I had to hear it from His Majesty who had to hear it from *Griphook* and neither are happy."

"Oh dear, the gorgeous man in leather is angry," Magnus whispers, "how delightful."

"You're a gorgeous man in leather, Mags."

"Harry Potter, you little charm machine."

"Idiot," Harry rubs his nose against Magnus' jacket. Magnus smells like leather just like Sirius always did, but there is that familiar scent of incense and amber and his magic tastes like ancient things. Harry breathes deeply. There is so much he wants to tell Magnus, so much he wants to say but Bill is right there, glaring at his Sire and godfather and Remus still doesn't know some things and there are even things that Harry hasn't said to Severus yet. *Dreaming of Merlin, betraying Theo to protect him, missing Theo so fucking badly.* So Harry thinks of a subtle way to say it. "I met a friend of yours."

"You did?"

"Yeah." Harry sighs into Magnus' chest, his voice travelling through Magnus' body rather than on the air to his ears. "She told me to tell you that the Shakespeare quote you taught me was appropriate for the one who brings destinies. She told me you had done right by her."

Magnus stiffens for a second and Harry feels him holding his breath.

"Did she now?" Magnus' voice is too soft for anyone else to hear, even if they weren't absorbed in a fight about the Dursleys. "The Lady hasn't sent me a message in centuries. I was beginning to think I has pissed her off."

Harry snorts in relief. Magnus isn't worried. Magnus won't be scared of his secrets. Magnus is like him. The only other one like him. *He's half a Mage, maybe he knows why I'm so weird.*

"I'm glad you're back," Harry mumbles.

"So am I," Magnus cups Harry's face, lifting his gaze, those golden eyes searching Harry's. "But where is Theodore?"

"Safe," Harry says, averting his eyes. "Away from me."

Magnus' eyes flicker with concern but before he can speak, there is the sound of a whisky bottle being slammed against the counter.

"I don't care!" Remus yells, glaring at both Bill and Severus. Kreacher hisses from where he is standing on a stool in front of the stove, stirring a pot. Remus' eyes find Harry's. They are very orange right now. "He's not going back to that fucking hellhole!"

"Actually, I am," Harry says. Magnus sits back down in the armchair, pulling Harry with him so Harry is sitting on the arm of the chair, Magnus holding his hand. Harry takes the opportunity to play with some of the rings on his hand, his fingers naturally finding the new Black steward ring, a little pulse of cold magic flowing between. It makes Harry smile. "I get Magnus as my Steward and Dumbledore gets me at the Dursleys for a few days. Quid pro whatever."

"Quo," Severus and Bill say at the same time, but it is clearly not what Remus wants. He is clenching and unclenching his fists and Harry thinks he looks like he might want to punch things.

"Albus is manipulating you and I won't allow it," Remus snarls. "If I had been there -,"

"Yeah, but you weren't and now it's done and it can't be changed," Harry shrugs, flexing his hand so Remus' eyes fix on his Black ring. "Magic."

"Merlin, you didn't," Remus moans, burying his head in his hands. Bill, however, still looks irritated.

"Yes, he did." Bill holds up a photograph of Harry and Dumbledore shaking hands, light bursting from their fingertips.

"Lovely binding, Harry," Magnus mutters but Harry doesn't think anyone else hears him.

"The Contessa sent this to His Majesty," Bill says. "Apparently the Roman press are running stories that Ward was protecting a goblin -,"

"That's bollocks, Griphook was protecting me -,"

"I know he was," Bill's eyes are very intense and Harry thinks that if this is Bill's annoyed face, he's very glad he's not Fred and George. "I also know he told you that you should wait for his Majesty. You should have waited."

"That would have meant spending more time with Dumbledore," Harry mutters, his cheeks flushing with the rebuke. He knows Bill means well, but he wasn't there. "Which I am *not* going to do."

Bill sighs and rubs his forehead, the piercing in his eyebrow wiggling.

"Ward, I know you're used to handling things for yourself -," he says in a very level voice.

"If you can call it handling," Severus mutters.

"*Piss off*," Harry hisses at him.

"Tone," Severus says, almost sounding bored as he lifts a coffee cup to his lips.

"- but you are a Ward of the Silver Hall and an *Anzar* in training," Bill continues, eyes flashing angrily towards Severus as if he finds Severus' lack of emotion irritating. *Maybe Severus is in trouble too.* "You can't cause an international incident in Rome that has the Contessa bringing up arms and not tell His Majesty. He should have heard about it from you first and he should have been there."

"An international incident?" Harry frowns. "All did was bind him, the magic, y'know, it kinda does its own thing -,"

"Wait, you *bound* Albus Dumbledore? It wasn't simply a blood vow, as Griphook said?" Bill gives him a piercing glare. Remus stills, his hands tight on the whisky bottle. Severus' mug pauses on the way to his lips. Magnus' fingers, which have been playfully trying to escape and evade Harry's curious twisting of his rings, stop moving. Harry can feel the same thought echoing around the room: *Oh shit. That's definitely a Mage thing.* Harry swallows hard and shrugs as carelessly as he can manage, keeping his gaze fixed on Magnus' new Black ring.

"Sort of," he mumbles. "It's whatever."

There is no sound in the room, only Kreacher stirring his pot and the sound of a car backfiring out on the road. Harry cautiously looks up and finds Bill, still staring at him, as if waiting for a better answer. Harry doesn't give it. Bill turns to look at Harry's parents, both of whom have not moved.

"Someone explain this," he says tersely.

"You know he is powerful," Remus says tightly. "You know what he is."

"Necromancers are not bonders, not at fifteen years old and never like this," Bill says.

"Necromancer," Magnus repeats, tapping his fingernails, painted blue, against the back of Harry's hand. "That is a new term. Nice tattoo."

"Yeah, not fond of it, to be honest," Harry winces. "Do you have nail varnish with you?"

"Neither was my father," Magnus smirks. "I have some in my trunk, yes."

"Any black?" Harry says, thinking of Severus' story.

"Explain," Bill demands.

"The nail varnish?" Harry frowns and looks at Severus who shakes his head minutely, eyes darting to Harry and then back to Bill.

"I think Weasley wishes to know about the source of your power, *farzandam*," Severus says quietly. "It is not a wish we can grant."

"I told you to count on me," Bill's voice is harsh. "I told you where my allegiances were."

Harry doesn't know what this means and looks down at Magnus who gives a light shrug, so Harry knows not to worry about it. Severus probably has it under control.

"Bill -," Remus tries to say, voice placating.

"You did," Severus' voice is dangerously soft. Harry unconsciously stiffens the tethers between them. Magnus glances down at Harry's right wrist curiously and Harry wonders if he can sense it. "We did not discuss, however, what should happen if those two allegiances came into conflict."

Bill looks at Severus for a hard moment and then twists to Harry, blue eyes fierce.

"Compel me," he says shortly.

"What?" Harry's throat is suddenly dry. Severus and Remus don't move or speak, so Harry knows this is something they definitely haven't expected.

"Like you did in Gringotts, compel me not to speak of secrets spoken here," Bill says, flexing his fingers. "So I may not repeat them."

"Have you been dabbling in compulsions, Mr Potter?" Magnus says lightly, but Harry can sense the heat of his magic. He knows Magnus is concerned. *He'll probably be even more concerned when he hears I tried to compel Severus to tell me the truth yesterday.*

"Not intentionally," Harry mutters, feeling a flush creep up his cheek. He looks up at Bill. "Can't I just trust you not to tell?"

"*Anzars* must tell their King everything, Harry," Remus says softly.

"Which is why he cannot be told," Severus says, setting his mug down with a sharp snap.

"Why I can't be told unless I'm compelled to secrecy," Bill corrects, shooting a glare at Severus before looking at Harry. "Compel me, because I'm not leaving here without an answer."

"I don't want to compel you! The last time was an accident!" Harry swallows panic and finds himself searching for Severus' dark eyes, even as Magnus' hand rubs up and down his back with a special, comforting warmth. "I'm not like that!"

Understanding flickers immediately in Severus' eyes and Harry could almost cry with the relief of it. *He knows what I mean.*

"You are not," Severus says calmly. "You do not need to. He does not need to know. You do not need to do anything."

Harry sighs, breathing out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. His hand strays to his rubber band and he plucks it, the sharp stinging pain helping with the whole breathing and not thinking the terrible thoughts. *They despise you. You are everything they fear and hate. I have seen your heart and it is mine.* Both Remus' and Severus' eyes are focused entirely on the band on his wrist.

"One hundred," Remus says quietly, into the rim of his teacup. "Ninety-nine..."

Harry nods slowly and begins to count, ignoring the way Bill looks at him curiously. *Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven...* His breathing starts to steady. Magnus' fingers on his left hand tap thoughtfully against the arm of the chair.

"Although ... it could be helpful to bring Lord Weasley in," Magnus says thoughtfully, twisting to look at Harry. "How many?"

"How many...?" Harry repeats, not immediately understanding until he sees something in Magnus' eyes that reminds him of the day they first met. *How many know?* "I dunno."

"Kreacher does," Kreacher croaks from the oven, where he is staring at Harry, eyes narrowed. Harry expects Bill to make demands of what they are talking about but he does none of it. He stands by the sofa and the pile of tote bags which Harry thinks are stuffed with second-hand clothes from Hermione, in between the armchair and the counter, watching them all with icy blue eyes. Waiting. Observing. Magnus flicks his fingers and a paper and quill zoom across the counter towards Kreacher.

"A list please, if you would, Kreacher," Magnus says pleasantly, "and if I could have an Irish coffee without the coffee, I'd appreciate it."

Kreacher grunts and scratches names down quickly, pushing the list past Remus and Severus who both scowl at it but nod. Magnus flicks his fingers again and it zooms over to them. Harry catches it and smooths the parchment out, looking at the list.

Master.

Master's familiar.

Master's Suitor.

Master's Weasley.

Master's Potter Sister.

Master's Sire.

Master's wolf.

Master's Daughter of the House of Black

Master's Loony.

Master's Steward.

Harry snorts at it.

"This list is wrong, Kreacher," Harry says. The elf glowers at him.

"Kreacher's list is perfect," Kreacher growls.

"No, because it doesn't have Kreacher on it, does it?" Harry grins, reaching for the quill and scrawling a final addition. "Master's ... pain ... in the arse..."

"Master's end! Master's doom!" Kreacher points his wooden spoon at Harry emphatically. "Master's worst nightmare!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll believe it when I see it," Harry mutters, pushing the paper with '*Kreacher*' added in his haphazard handwriting. "Eleven."

"Bill will make twelve ..." Magnus looks at the paper, taking the quill and drawing strange lines. "Divides into three ... groups of three ..."

Harry sees patterns emerge in the scribbles, groups of three emerging with Latin words beside them. *Familia, vinculum, creaturae, custodes* ... Inside his mind, Harry hears Nimue's voice from his dream saying: *I am the third that you need.*

"Why three?" Harry asks quietly, his heart thundering in his ears. *Why did there need to be three?*

"It is the most magically powerful number in the ancient magics," Bill answers, his eyes fixed on the list that he cannot possibly read from where he stands. "The other magically powerful number is seven."

Inside his mind, he feels something bristle. Hears the Grim's growl whispering behind his ears.

"Not seven," Harry says abruptly. He remembers the three points of the burning triangle he sometimes stares at with Death in his not-dream-dreams. He feels an odd tingle in the rune at his throat and rubs it absently, noticing the way Severus' eyes have fixed upon it. "Three. I like three."

"Of course you do," Magnus says, smiling to himself as he draws some quick symbols on the paper. "You are a third, after all."

Merlin. John Dee. Me.

Oh. Harry gets a sense of patterns of three spinning out from him, *Merlin, John Dee, Me. Merlin, Nimue, Morgana. Me, Theo, Luna.* Threes are important, he knows it in his bones which he knows, if Luna was touching him, would glow with gold.

"If we bring Bill in, then it's still threes?" Harry asks quietly.

"Yes," Magnus nods. "Then there are twelve."

Harry realises he wants Bill to know. He also realises he knows a way to do it. After all, there are other people who keep Harry's secrets. *Blaise and Daphne.*

"Can I do something?" He asks Severus. He stares into his Sire's eyes, letting words form easily inside his mind, daring him to pluck them out: *I can use a vow.* Severus gives him a long look for a moment but then nods, taking another sip of his coffee and then, in a movement that has Harry's eyes nearly boggling out of his head, moves his hand across the counter to cover one of Remus' clenched fists. *What the fuck.* Harry rationally knows that Remus and Severus aren't sharing a bedroom just for the hell of it, that Severus has started calling Remus by his first name in private and that is not a random occurrence. Still, seeing their affection out in the open is fucking weird. Remus looks down in surprise and then up at Severus and Harry sees, as he often does now, the silent conversation that happens between their eyes. Remus sighs heavily and looks back at Harry, closing his eyes wearily in assent. Harry didn't even know he was waiting for it, but now he has it, this silent permission, he gets up and walks over to Bill. Magnus taps his Black finger significantly as he does and then holds out his hand for the mug of what looks to be straight whiskey that Kreacher has sent hovering across the room to him.

"Ward," Bill says quietly, his solemn eyes fixed on Harry's face. For the first time, they don't remind Harry of Arthur. Maybe Bill's growing into them but his eyes seem sharper, more layered than Arthur's ever did. *He's not the same Lord, he's different.*

"I'm not going to compel you, but I can ... do something else, it's a vow. Kind of." Harry awkwardly extends his hand to Bill, his left hand that struggles to grip but is full of the keening Black magic, ready to defend and build. *The Black Prince will ride.* Even though it comforts him, Harry cannot help but miss the Slytherin magic and its sparkling joy when it comes to binding. "Do you swear to keep the secret of who I am?"

"Of who we are," Magnus says quietly behind him. Harry catches his eye and nods. This isn't only his secret. Magnus is here. Magnus is his Steward. Magnus is half a Mage. *It's our history. It's our lore. It's who we are.*

"Of who we are," Harry repeats. "Do you swear to keep it secret from everyone and ..." Harry catches Kreacher's eyes and thinks of loopholes. "... Not to share it with anyone except for the people in this room?"

"I do," Bill says with such immediacy that Harry feels joy and thankfulness rise in his heart. When Bill grasps his trembling hand there is an odd roar there too, a warmth that tastes like summer air. *Family.* "With my life and my wand, Lord Black, I swear it."

"*We accept your word and vow, Lord Weasley,*" Harry hisses without meaning to, and from the way that Bill's eyes widen Harry knows that for the first time, Bill has understood his parseltongue. Instantly, white tongues of flame leap out of the Black ring, spiralling around and joining in the powdery yellow streaks of magic that twist out of the Weasley Lordship ring on Bill's finger. Harry tastes the Weasley magic again, just like he had when Arthur died and almost chokes on it. It is the sweetness of fresh meadows, the rush of fresh air through long grass but now it is different. Now it has Bill and it is sharper, bloodier, a little metallic. *Marjoram*, Harry thinks, imagining the hanging herbs in Fabiola's cottage. He doesn't mean to, but he thinks of Arthur, remembers the final thoughts he gave him, how metallic Arthur's blood tasted. *Ron, so loving, Percy, so funny, the Twins, so loyal, Charlie, so kind, Ginny, so fierce, Bill, so powerful, Molly, so nurturing. Molly, first and last.* Too late, Harry remembers how it had been with Neville, how the memory had been shared between them. Harry sees Bill's eyes widen, sees his skin blanch, and Harry swallows hard. He drops Bill's hand. Bill doesn't stop staring at him, blue eyes suddenly a little cloudy.

"You did that for him," Bill whispers. "You ... you used blood magic and you ..."

"I'm a Mage. That's the secret," Harry says abruptly. He doesn't want to dwell on it. He told Mrs Weasley but he didn't tell anyone else. He gestures to Magnus. "Magnus is half a Mage."

"Half a Mage," Bill repeats, still staring at Harry.

"And half a Daemon," Magnus says brightly, twirling the quill. "So I'll add Mr Weasley here -,"

"Master's *Anzar*," Kreacher grunts, reaching down to pull something out of the other, sweet and buttery. It smells amazing so Harry drifts over towards the counter, feeling his tether with Severus shorten the closer he gets. Somehow, that helps.

"Yes, very good Kreacher, that's twelve," Magnus grins, setting the quill to the page. "Perfect."

"Can I have a cup of coffee?" Harry asks. Severus wordlessly pours him a small one from the cafetière and pushes the milk jug closer to Harry but he shakes his head. "Just black, thanks."

Severus raises his eyebrows at the change. Harry rolls his eyes.

"Blame Blaise," he mutters and then turns to Kreacher, well aware that Bill has not stopped staring at him. "What are you making?"

"Bird stew for dinner, croissants for breakfast," Kreacher mutters. "Is stupid time for eating so Kreacher makes both."

"That's either mad or genius," Harry says. "What kind of stew?"

"Bird stew," Kreacher mutters, growling at Harry when he tries to snatch a golden croissant from the tray. "Too hot."

"What kind of bird?" Harry demands.

"Bird," Kreacher stares at him. "All birds are the same."

"I dunno, Kreacher, I don't want to eat a seagull," Harry says. "Or, like, a phoenix -,"

"Speak for yourself," Severus mutters into his glass. Harry tries to hide his smirk. Severus hates Fawkes.

"I think Mr Weasley needs a drink," Magnus announces. He stands up and wanders to the sofa, beginning to peek into Hermione's tote bags. "Ooh, lovely scarf!"

"What?" Bill stares blankly at Magnus as he pulls a gold and fuschia scarf out and drapes it over his shoulders.

"Here," Remus says quietly, pouring straight whisky into a mug and pushing it to the edge of the counter, catching Bill's eye. "C'mon. Drink. You'll feel better. I did when I found out."

Harry watches as Bill moves forward in a daze, one hand braced on the counter as he knocks back the golden liquid. Harry sneaks a croissant, despite Kreacher's grumblings and decides to give Bill a moment to digest. He picks up the cup of coffee Severus has poured him and dips his croissant into it, crunching on hot, soft bread and moves back over to the couch, rummaging in the bags. He pulls out an old t-shirt from one of the bags. It has Wonder Woman on it.

"Cool," Harry grins, turning the t-shirt around to face Magnus, who is now wearing a pair of purple-tinted sunglasses with the fuschia scarf. "Hermione must have asked her Mum and Dad for some stuff."

"Excellent choices," Magnus nods approvingly, lifting a frilled green lace cardigan that looks like something Hermione would have been gifted and instantly rejected. "Might I have this?"

"Definitely," Harry laughs.

"Will you tell me who else is on the list?" Bill asks behind them.

"There is no need since your vow forbids you from speaking of it outside of the people currently in the room," Severus says smoothly.

"But Albus isn't on it," Bill says. "Or Harry wouldn't have rushed to make a deal with him to get him away from the Black Stewardship."

"Harry didn't rush, Harry was offered and Harry did the smart thing," Harry glares at Bill who looks at him with raw, slightly dazed eyes. Bill shakes his head.

"*Uzbadgabil*," Bill mutters, looking at Harry with an expression that is a mix of irritation and fondness. "We spoke of becoming, Harry. You could have mentioned you already were."

"Would have been awkward," Harry mumbles, giving Bill a curious look. "You're calling me Harry."

"I am," Bill nods. "I am under your vow and not my *Anzar* vow in this matter only. Therefore, you are Harry and not Ward. Although -," Bill shakes his head again. "I have no idea how you managed such a complex binding."

"It is what Master does," Kreacher mutters. Harry gives him a look. Other people don't know about Kreacher's unusual binding and it doesn't feel like the kind of thing he wants to share.

"He has a knack for it," Magnus says agreeably, shucking off his leather jacket so he can try a violently green and red kimono-style dressing gown on.

"Knack would imply a skill was learned," Severus mutters into his coffee.

" *Wanker*," Harry hisses at him. Severus raises his eyebrow loftily.

"Have you considered the possibility that if you only speak certain parseltongue words to me I may eventually be able to discern their meaning?" Severus drawls. "A language is a language, after all."

"*Then I'll have to be more inventive*," Harry hisses back. "*Dickface*."

"That was new," Severus narrows his eyes. Harry gives him a nasty smirk. He trusts his Sire, sometimes he even thinks he might like him a little bit, but most of the time he is still an arrogant, irritating fucker and that doesn't seem to be changing.

"So Harry's like you," Bill's voice is shaky as he watches Magnus sip his coffee. "You're a Necromancer too?"

"No, all Mages are differently gifted, I myself enjoy a touch of destiny but my father enjoyed similar talents to Harry," Magnus winks at Harry and pulls a classic twiggie dress out of the bag. "Now, why would Miss Granger reject such a gem?"

"So Harry's gift is Necromancy?" Bill presses. Harry's stomach flips.

"The child will be who he will be," Severus' voice is very sharp. "He is fifteen. He is not grown yet."

Harry can't help the look of relief he shoots towards his Sire. *You are not set in stone*. It might be the kindest thing Severus has ever said to him.

"Severus is quite right," Magnus grins at Harry. "Harry could be gifted that way but as I said, he also has an affinity for bonding. Being able to do a thing is not the same as a Mage gift. My father's Mage gift was creation, but they called him a Necromancer all the same. Merlin's gift was probably binding but he was known for Shapeshifting."

"Cool," Harry grins back. "Do you think I could -?"

"No," Severus says, very firmly.

"Are you going to stay here?" Bill asks, looking between them all.

"I need to go back to Venice but ..." Remus looks at Severus who does not speak or move. "I think so. There is some concern over the Italian press."

"I bet," Bill mutters and then looks at Magnus. "You?"

"I shall be wherever Lord Black requires me to be," Magnus says cheerfully.

"Here," Harry says quickly and he sees Severus wince out of the corner of his eye.

"I will help you fortify your Wards," Bill says. "But access needs to be absolutely minimal. Me and maybe one other person and that should be it."

"Theodore, then?" Magnus says, looking at Harry. He shakes his head.

"No, it should be ..." he hesitates, glancing at Bill. Then he has a brainwave. "Lady Macbeth."

"Who?" Bill says, who is luckily not as up on his Shakespeare as his youngest siblings.

"A friend," Severus waves a hand indifferently, "I shall key them in myself."

"Fine," Bill turns to look at Harry, eyes glittering darkly. "Who knows you are here?"

"You lot," Harry shrugs.

"And Hermione?" Bill presses.

"Oh, yeah."

"No," Severus says. "You told Miss Granger you were going home, not where you were going."

"Oh," Harry suddenly feels a bit odd and blushes, looking at his feet. Does he think of Spinner's End of home on some level? He thinks back to when he used the portkey. What was he thinking about? *Herbs. Smoke. Black eyes.* "Yeah, I did that."

"So the only people who know you are here are in this room," Bill clarifies, his jaw setting. "That's good, it makes things easier to defend. I'm putting Spinners End under Goblin protection."

"Excuse me?" Severus says.

"His Majesty has decreed it, wherever Ward is staying shall be given the best protection we can provide depending on the accommodation," Bill says, his hand automatically reaching for the hilt of his axe. "I'll adjust the wards accordingly and we'll work out something similar for the Dursleys next week, though a muggle residence has certain ... restrictions. You return on Tuesday for four days, right?"

There is a crash as Remus cracks the whisky bottle with his bare hand, liquid spilling over his wrist. Severus instantly waves his wand, the mess disappearing and moves closer, beginning to pluck pieces of glass from Remus' skin.

"Idiot wolf," Severus mutters.

"Four days and two hours and thirty-five minutes," Harry looks at Bill. "Hermione's coming with me, she knows. Fred knows and so will George. Griphook obviously knows and he says he has a device that can measure the protection -,"

"He told me," Bill says. "I'll make sure the twins have it on Tuesday. Who else?"

"That's everyone who knows."

"Theodore?" Magnus prompts, pausing in the middle of trying on a pair of fingerless lace gloves. Harry flinches but shakes his head. He's not going to tell him that he's going to the Dursleys. Theo will go mad. Magnus raises a dark eyebrow and Harry knows he has questions.

"Right," Bill nods and folds his arms. "I understand that everyone here is powerful. I understand that everyone has their own notions of how to protect Harry -,"

"I don't need protecting," Harry grumbles.

"And I don't need wolfsbane," Remus mutters. Harry glares at him.

“But this needs some coordination. Your relatives' house is under very close observation from all parties. Obviously, none of you can even be seen in Privet Drive -,” Bill gestures to Remus, Severus and Magnus.

“Why not Magnus?” Harry interrupts since he has secretly thought it might be fun to park Magnus on the doorstep and just watch Vernon’s head explode.

“It’s never a good idea to have your Lord, your Steward and your guardsmen all in the same place unless it’s your stronghold, Harry,” Magnus says, taking a swig of his whisky. “Just in case.”

“Exactly,” Bill nods. “We’ll spread out whilst you’re there. Severus will stay here, Remus will be in Venice, Magnus will be somewhere that’s fortified for Blacks -,”

“Master’s castle,” Kreacher croaks.

“I have a castle?” Harry stares.

“Master is stupid,” Kreacher glares.

“Stupid with a castle,” Harry looks at Magnus. “You’ll go there, then? Is this because if shit goes down, there are multiple places to run to?”

“Exactly,” Magnus smiles at him.

“And we think shit might go down?” Harry looks at Severus nervously.

“Language,” Severus says softly, briefly looking up from Remus’ hand. “I do not think the Dark Lord intends to make a move, no.”

“But you have to tell him I’m going there,” Harry confirms. Severus nods curtly.

“Albus will ask me to, yes.”

“Why?” Harry stares at Remus, who has a familiar slightly glassy expression that he always has when he’s fighting down his instinct to go completely feral.

“Severus has a cover to maintain,” Remus says shortly, “and Albus might think there is ... value in drawing Voldemort out.”

Harry feels nauseous. He wonders suddenly if this is really the reason behind Dumbledore wanting him to go back and Dumbledore trading the Black stewardship away. *Bait. He’s using me as fucking bait again.* Harry clenches his fists. All of the lights in the room flicker. Kreacher, Remus and Severus all stop moving.

“Harrison,” Severus says slowly. “Breathe, please.”

Harry tries to, shaking his head mirthlessly.

“He’s stupid if he thinks Tom will come busting down to Privet Drive to grab me,” Harry snorts and relaxes his hands. “Tom wants me in Privet Drive. He wants to see what I’ll do to them.”

“He does love a show,” Magnus murmurs and Harry grins at him. It makes him feel a little better that there’s another person who views Tom with the same kind of irreverent irritation that he does.

“Whatever our own opinions might be about Voldemort’s movements and decisions, the fact of the matter is from Monday there’s going to be a muggle house armed to the teeth with Goblin contingencies that is being watched by Death Eaters, members of the Order of the Phoenix and representatives from the Ministry of Magic, if not also secret agents from the Congregation if the Contessa’s words are anything to go by,” Bill says. “Even if Voldemort never shows his face -,”

“Snake face,” Harry puts in and Magnus grins.

“- it still has the potential to be an utter shit show,” Bill finishes. “Which is why we need to proceed carefully. There can be no one in that house with those muggles who are in any way affiliated with a political group. It could start a war on the doorstep.”

“That would really piss Petunia off,” Harry says. “So maybe that’s a good thing.”

“You imply the war hasn’t already begun,” Remus mutters, his eyes flashing.

“I take it that means you won’t be making an appearance, Lord Weasley?” Magnus says, winking at Bill.

“Not in person, no,” Bill says, looking at Harry. “But Fred and George will do everything I tell them to and they’ll have portkeys, a variety of them in case they hear that someone is compromised.”

“That’s all fine, but the problem isn’t gonna be whoever rocks up outside,” Harry mutters, chomping down on his croissant. “The problem is gonna be Vernon, and if I turn up with two fully grown wizards who are planning to kip in his living room, he’ll have opinions.”

Loud, painful ones, Harry thinks with a wince. Severus’ eyes narrow.

“Then you shall alter them,” he says smoothly. Harry knows what that means. *Inspire fear and survive*.

“He’s a muggle,” Bill says sharply. “They all are. Compelling him or charming him will bring out the Ministry and, in all likelihood, the Minister.”

“Some magic,” Severus looks significantly at Harry’s right hand where his hidden Prince ring sits and then very deliberately at Kreacher. “Cannot be traced.”

“Kreacher will deal with fat muggle bully,” Kreacher mutters.

“Some house elf magic *is* traceable,” Bill counters. “Malfoy will not hesitate to blame Harry. Any traceable magic performed inside Privet Drive in the next five days will fall at his feet.”

“Hasn’t it always?” Harry scowls, thinking of Dobby. “I don’t get it, wixen cast spells on muggles all the time.”

“Have you?” Bill says. “You’ve seen my Dad do it, but he was a Ministry official. You’ve seen Death Eaters do it and that’s illegal. Casting on a Muggle without being a Ministry employee is a breach of the statute of secrecy.”

“Yeah, but it seems like people do it anyway,” Harry scoffs, thinking of how easy Blaise was about the idea in Rome.

“Because most of the time, magic is difficult trace unless you know what you’re looking for,” Remus says. “If someone casts a befuddlement spell on a muggle outside St Mungo’s, the magical intensity around the hospital makes it almost impossible to trace.”

“This won’t be like that,” Bill says flatly. “This is a muggle house away from highly concentrated magical energy. The Minister will send people who will be watching and monitoring and looking especially for underage magic or magic cast directly against muggles.”

“A tidy trap,” Severus mutters and Harry knows what that means. Different Minister for Magic, same fucking plan: trap Harry Potter.

“That does not make me feel better,” Harry says forcefully. “Because they can all sit on the doorstep with their monitors or whatever, but it doesn’t matter if he beats me to a fucking pulp, does it?”

The lights flicker again. He feels Magnus’ warm hand on his shoulder and Severus’ tether around his wrist. Harry takes a shuddering breath and munches down the rest of his croissant, even as the butter in it makes his stomach churn.

“I am going to Privet Drive tomorrow. I’m going to have a stern chat with your uncle on behalf of His Majesty,” Bill says flatly. “He will not lay a finger on you.”

“You’re going to trust his word?” Remus growls. “His *reluctant promise* not to hurt Harry?”

“No, which is why I’m going to put the fear of God into him,” Bill says darkly. “Albus has said he’ll talk to Lily’s sister.”

It’s weird, Harry thinks, to hear Petunia described that way. She would certainly hate it.

“So in summary, we are letting Harry return to an abusive home where he can’t do magic with only the promise of his uncle being non-violent towards him?” Remus’ voice is starting to shake. Harry winces at the word he hates. *I’m not abused*, he thinks mulishly, *they’re just fucking annoying*.

“No,” Bill says. “We are giving him wards. We are giving him goblin protection. Here -,”

Bill steps forward and holds out his hand. In his palm is a golden ear cuff which seems to have a khuzdul rune engraved on it. He carefully slides it onto the tip of Harry’s ear. Harry immediately feels as if the gravity in the room has increased and stumbles a little against Magnus.

“Woah,” he looks up at Bill. “Why does that feel so weird?”

“It’s something goblins use to protect their young,” Bill says softly, but he’s looking at Harry curiously. “I don’t think it has ever been worn by an outsider before.”

“What is it?” Severus asks sharply. Harry can feel how the tether around his wrist is tightening as if Severus is worried it is a portkey that will whisk him away somewhere.

“It’s a portable ward. You can only wear it for short lengths of time. This one is set for the time of your stay and then it will become inert. Basically, it feeds directly into the wards that I will set up around Privet Drive before you arrive. You’ll feel any hostile breaches immediately and the ward will close to your skin.”

“So it will stop protecting the house and start protecting Harry,” Remus says, seeming to forget his hand full of glass now that an interesting artefact has come along. “Fascinating.”

Bill nods and carefully removes the ear cuff. Harry is glad and feels like he can stand up properly again.

“Will I get used to the -,” Harry gestures to the air around him. “Pressure thing?”

“I don’t know,” Bill says slowly. “Goblins do not feel any change.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to get used to it then,” Harry snarks. “Just like everything else.”

Like having to bargain every second of my fucking life. Like Sirius being dead. Like Arthur being dead. Like Cedric being always dead. He knows everyone is looking at him, he knows they’re all just trying to work around a mess he created but he doesn’t care. Suddenly, it’s all very unfair.

“Should have told Dumbledore to shove it and let Tom have them,” Harry hisses to himself, content that they can’t understand. *“Should have sent him a fucking thank you note.”*

“I have need of a cigarette,” Magnus says. “Join me, Harry?”

"Sure," Harry says, tossing a hoodie with Nirvana on it back onto the sofa as Magnus pulls his leather jacket on over the kimono. He glances at Severus and Remus. His godfather is wincing as Severus slowly withdraws a shard of glass from his palm whilst Severus mutters under his breath in annoyance. Bill is watching with morbid curiosity. "Can I?"

"If a cigarette touches your lips -," Severus warns, without removing his eyes from Remus' hand.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm not an idiot," Harry rolls his eyes, following Magnus out onto the stoop. As they close the door behind them, Harry hears Bill beginning to speak again.

"Let's talk about wards ..."

"They'll be hours," Magnus rolls his eyes before sitting down on the stoop, withdrawing a silver cigarette case and pulling out the most luxurious black cigarettes Harry has ever seen. "Hold this for me, little Mage."

Harry takes hold of Magnus' mug and looks down at the golden liquid inside it. He sniffs it suspiciously. It smells like Sirius.

"Can I try it?" Harry asks.

"Of course," Magnus says. Unlike Sirius, who always lit his cigarettes from a classic muggle lighter or matches, Magnus merely twists flame out of his fingers and holds a black cigarette tip against it. Harry brings the cocktail to his lips and takes the smallest of sips.

"Bleugh," Harry pulls a face, fighting back the urge to purse his lips like Petunia.

"Not to your taste?" Magnus laughs, looking exactly like Remus did when Harry first tried a cigarette.

"Butterbeer is better," Harry says.

"Bleugh," Magnus mimics Harry's face and Harry laughs in turn, sitting down beside him on the chilled, slightly damp stone. He stares up at the sky, where the stars are still showing even as the light blue of the dawn is pulled up behind the factory. He automatically tries to find Canis Major. He looks down at his tattoo and flexes his trembling hand.

"Right, Mr Potter," Magnus blows out smoke and twists his fingers through smoke, pushing it into shapes that look like runes. "What's going on with you and Mr Nott?"

"Nothing," Harry says, blushing and looking down into Magnus' mug. He wonders, suddenly, if he drunk the whole thing would he feel better? Severus' voice jumps into his head: *The desire to self-destruct was all-encompassing. I drank.* Harry decides then and there that of all the problems he has right now, an additional drinking problem isn't one of them and maybe, that's a good thing.

"You haven't told him where you are," Magnus says.

"He hasn't asked," Harry knows it's a cop out as he says it because he deliberately hasn't looked at his journal since he got back. Partly he hasn't had the opportunity but partly because he knows what kind of furious betrayal is waiting for him. He's sort of glad when Magnus just nods and carries on, even though he knows deep down that Magnus has missed nothing.

"And your relatives?" Magnus prompts quietly. "Why don't you want to tell him you're going back?"

"He'd kill them." Harry takes another sip of Magnus' whiskey. This time, he doesn't cough or make a face. The astringent smokiness of it, the power of the alcohol in it seems to help words come out. "He already killed someone for me. He doesn't need to kill the Dursleys too."

"Hmm," Magnus blows out smoke, his golden eyes looking up to the sky. "When?"

"Department of Mysteries." Harry tries not to wince when he says the words. "Lestrangle. I got Mulciber."

"Rabastan or Rodolphus?" Magnus asks, looking at Harry. "I assume it was not Bella."

"No, she's alive," Harry says tonelessly. Bellatrix is the one thing he tries very hard not to talk about because every time her name is mentioned, two things happen. He wants to punch something, very hard, and there is an icy swell inside the Black Diamond. *Outrage. Injustice. Vengeance.* "Rodolphus. Do you know him?"

"I met him once, when he was Bella's suitor. He did nothing to impress, I must say. He was two years younger than her and utterly devoted. Anyone with half a mind could see she required someone who could at least stand up to her. Unfortunately, Cygnus did not see my point of view." Magnus waves his fingers, as if dismissing the memory entirely. Harry watches the smoke furl away from Magnus' lips and listens. It feels important, somehow, to hear stories of people who have been killed on his behalf. "I was more familiar with Rabastan. He was Severus and Regulus' contemporary."

Harry knows what that means. It means Rabastan Lestrangle was at school with Severus and Remus and Regulus. With Lily and James and Sirius. It means that they had Potions together and played Quidditch against one another. The idea that years from now he could be trying to kill someone he goes to Hogwarts with right now is weirdly horrible. In a flicker, he thinks of Malfoy.

"He's alive," Harry says quietly, tipping the mug from side to side. "But he can't walk. Remus did it. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" Magnus asks gently.

"That people you knew are hurt or dead because of me," Harry swallows.

"Everyone I know eventually gets hurt or dies, little Mage," Magnus takes a drag on his cigarette and gives Harry a faint smile. "What happens to them is not your fault. Destinies and stars and all that."

"But I killed Mulciber," Harry says. "Or, well, Prongs did. He was going to kill Remus, I think."

Suddenly, it bothers Harry that he doesn't know that for certain.

"Good for Prongs," Magnus nods. "Mulciber was in Abraxas' set. Orion thought little of him and I thought even less, though I heard he did make a lovely curry."

"I didn't mean to do it," Harry mutters.

"Harry, you meant to save Remus and you did," Magnus says simply. "When did it happen?"

"Theo killed Lestrage whilst I was ... when Sirius and I ... behind the veil," Harry stumbles over the word 'killed'. "I got Mulciber when I came back through."

"You had both just lost fathers. Of a sort," Magnus says. "It makes sense."

"Of a sort." Harry snorts and shakes his head. "They were both shit excuses for Dads."

"Maybe," Magnus puffs out smoke slowly. "Do you see her still? After the veil?"

Harry doesn't need to ask who.

"Yeah." Harry swirls the liquid in the glass. *Lady Death*. They say nothing.

"It's alright, little Mage." Magnus pats his knee reassuringly. "You are not alone."

Then why do I feel more alone than I ever have?

"But no one is like me," Harry mumbles, feeling a little desperate as he leans forward, wrapping his arms around his knees. "Not even you, you said we're different. Like, your gift is destinies - what does destinies even mean, is it like Seeing and Scrying and shit?"

"No such shit for me," Magnus grins. "It is more like your Fae friend. I often recognise the heart of things."

"You know about Luna?" Harry asks.

"Xeno is an old pal of mine," Magnus smiles. "Ever met him?"

"No. I hear he's a bit bonkers."

"Completely, all the best people are," Magnus chortles.

"If I'm not like you then what am I like?" Harry mutters, rubbing his sore scar against his knees.
"What's my gift?"

"What do you think your gift is?"

Harry's heart thunders. He thinks of the veil, of Prongs with wings, of stretching out his hand when Death told him and sending Sirius obscurus' to the beyond. He thinks of the word on King Ragnok's tongue: *Necromancer*. Then he thinks of Death: *I am your servant, Master*.

"I dunno," Harry mumbles. "I don't want a gift."

"You can't fight yourself." Magnus twists his fingers, the Dee ring glowing softly as Magnus lazily draws a triangle of orange light with his finger. "My father couldn't either."

"Threes," Harry says quietly. "I ... I dream about them. Merlin, Morgana and Nimue."

"The first three," Magnus nods.

"Why do I dream of them?" Harry asks desperately. "Why does it happen?"

"There are some things that can't be explained or known," Magnus sighs, looking at the burning triangle. "All I can tell you is that my father dreamt of them, too. He was also one of three."

Harry hears Sahara's voice in his head.

Does why it happens matter when you know why it must happen?

I think it matters to me.

You only think so because you are not ready for yourself yet.

Harry groans and presses his head against his knees.

"Voices in your head?" Magnus says wryly, taking the mug of whiskey and sipping it.

"All the fucking time," Harry mutters. "Do you get that?"

"I do but, alas, they are all my own insecurities," Magnus chuckles, drawing on his cigarette.

"Did your Dad have a familiar?"

"He did," Magnus smiles fondly. "A cat called Mary."

"Mary's a weird name for a familiar."

"Well, he was in a particularly fawning phase towards the Queen of England," Magnus shakes his head. "She was not flattered. Although, of the three British Mages, I believe Merlin had the best named familiar. Archimedes."

"I don't want to have the best named familiar," Harry grumbles. "I just want to be me."

"You are always you, little Mage," Magnus hands Harry back the mug and raises his eyebrows, clearly encouraging Harry to take another tiny sip. He does, wincing. "You will be more yourself with Theo."

Harry stares up at the stars and thinks about all the ways his world has changed since the last evening he slept at Spinners End. *This is the last night, Theo.* He remembers the way Theo had sworn in Norse as Harry's lips had travelled over his chest and collarbone. How Theo had stopped them. *This is not our last night. There are other nights, I will make sure of it.* Everything is different now. Everything is worse. Now, Theo will probably never trust him again because Harry betrayed him and who would want to heart bond with Harry, even at the best of times? *We should have done it then, I knew we should have.* Harry feels an irrational irritation inside of him, a surge of it so powerful that white light spirals out of his hand, making the liquid in the mug roll in waves.

"Oops," Magnus takes the mug out of Harry's hand. "I'm not prying but -,"

"Do you ever wish you had heart bonded with someone?" Harry asks abruptly, twisting his face on his knees to look at Magnus. "Not shagging but like, the real thing?"

"Oh, a thousand people," Magnus rolls his eyes drolly. "Sex when you mean it is the best sex, after all."

"Yeah, but who, Mags? And why didn't you do it?" Harry presses. "Do you regret it? Do you think ... do you think you missed a moment and now you can never do it the same and nothing will ever be the same again, just as it was? So what's the point in trying to get it back?"

Harry breathes heavily, looking at Magnus who stares back, very still. Then, he slowly blows smoke out of the side of his mouth. It would be comical if Harry wasn't feeling nearly so tense.

"I see we've reached this portion of the evening," Magnus sighs. "Here I thought I had dodged this particular talk with a Lord Black but I suppose, in for a penny! May as well have the full set."

"Wait, you've given a sex talk to every Lord Black?" Harry stares at him. "Since ... the 16th Century?"

"Well, someone had to, especially after that mess with Robert Dudley," Magnus takes a swig of his whiskey.

"Even Sirius?"

"I believe I gave Sirius about *seven*," Magnus sighs dramatically.

"Sirius' Dad?"

"Safe to say, there has not been a Lord missed, though I am never sure it has done any good."

"Well, this isn't a sex talk," Harry says quickly.

"But we are talking about sex," Magnus smiles. "Or have I wildly misread the conversation?"

"No, we are, I just ... I know where everything goes, and I, well, I already had a boyfriend before Theo and we, like, did stuff and I have Hermione -,"

"You *have* Hermione?" Magnus' eyebrows shoot up. "Or have had, one presumes, given Theodore?"

"No!" Harry exclaims, "Not like that, I mean I have Hermione as, like, my eternal source of knowledge, she - she likes to buy books -,"

"She buys you sex books?" Magnus smirks. "I have misjudged Hermione Granger and I could not be happier for it."

"She buys books about everything!" Harry says, flustered. "That's not the point! You haven't answered my question."

"Indeed, I have not," Magnus says musingly. "I will admit, little Mage, that I had hoped this might be something that Puppy ..."

Harry's stomach squeezes with grief. *He didn't get me my first tattoo. He won't buy me my first legal drink. He never gave me the sex talk. He never took me out in muggle London to get hammered.* All of the stupid, fun, godfather milestones are lost.

"Me too," Harry says shortly. "But he's not here. You are."

"That I am," Magnus squares his shoulders and flicks back his hair, as if steeling himself for it.

"So...?" Harry prompts. "Heart bonding?"

"Well. I shall answer you but you may not enjoy all of the answers," Magnus says. "I have had many opportunities to heart bond and enjoyed the bonds created immensely, but I understand how it can feel to have ... missed a moment." Magnus sips his whiskey reflectively. "The reason why I didn't is simple. He was heart bonded elsewhere at the time."

"And you can't have more than one?" Harry frowns.

"Oh, you can and I have, in the past," Magnus smiles at Harry, "but the commitments must be complementary, at least, and this would not have been. The other bond, it would have ruined what they had with him and what the two of them shared was too powerful for me to jeopardise. Also, I do have that irritating ability to ..." Magnus waves his hand. "...anticipate the road coming, somewhat."

"So you knew something about them?" Harry guesses. Magnus nods. "Who was he?"

"I called him Star," Magnus smiles gently. Harry remembers the conversation he overheard in Grimmauld Place, Sirius' derision, Severus' despair. Magnus' quick tone: *we should not discuss Star.*

"Regulus Black," Harry whispers. "You loved him?"

"Perhaps. There are many forms of love and the longer I live, the more I see their diversity," Magnus' voice is oddly pensive as he looks up at the stars above them. "I have only once loved in the manner so all-consuming that I shall carry it with me all my days."

"That wasn't Regulus?"

"Camille," Magnus rolls his eyes fondly and derisively as he always does when he talks about the vampire. Harry really hopes he never has to meet her. He has a feeling that she would eat him alive. "I loved her as fiercely as Theodore loves you. I still do, in a way. When one has loved that way, even when that love sours, the bond between makes it hard to think of other loves as equal."

"So you didn't heart bond with Regulus because ... because it wouldn't mean as much as it did with Camille?" Harry summarises, frowning. "And that ... sucked?"

"You do have a way with words," Magnus chuckles, his reflective mood breaking like a spell. "Yes, quite right."

"And you saw something or felt something about the future?" Harry looks at Magnus with wide eyes. "Did you know he was going to die?"

"No," Magnus' voice is suddenly dark and Harry knows that if Magnus had known he would have done anything to stop it. "But I knew he would come back here. For Severus."

"I thought Severus took the Dark Mark for Regulus, not the other way around," Harry frowns.

"Ah, now that is not my story to tell," Magnus stubs his cigarette out under his heeled cowboy boot. "You and Theodore shall have your chance, little Mage, but you are already bonded more deeply than what a heart-bond could add."

"What do you mean?"

Magnus twists his finger. Streams of orange light twist together in a helix-like shape that reminds Harry of drawings Hermione did for him of DNA.

"How does your bond feel?" Magnus asks quietly. Harry considers the question. He remembers the voice of Oldest and Deepest in the Deep Place. *Where are my bonds? Where you left them.* Harry pauses. He thinks of the bond in the centre of his chest, the tugging pain from each and every rib.

"Stretched," Harry winces. "Like, it's tight."

"Your bond is more than a heart bond. A soul bond has more weight and bearing on your person than any of the other bonds you carry," Magnus gently strokes his finger against the orange helix of light so they tighten together, like a golden rope. "It feels tight because someone is pulling."

"What does that mean?" Harry asks.

"Perhaps one of you is pulling the other towards them, reaching out," Magnus gives him a sideways glance. "Or one of you is pulling away."

Harry blushes and looks down at his knitted socks. They are Dobby originals, snitches and dragons.

"I ... he thinks I betrayed him," Harry mumbles.

"Did you?" Magnus asks.

"No," Harry squeezes his eyes tight shut. "And yes, a bit."

"Fidelity bonds are precious, Harry," Magnus says. "They are resilient. I find that as with any normal betrayal, saying sorry goes a long way."

"I'm not sorry for protecting him," Harry says firmly. "I'm not sorry for keeping him from the Dursleys."

"Then what are you sorry for?" Magnus asks gently. He hands Harry back the mug of whiskey. Harry gratefully takes a little sip, wincing at the burn and the smokey taste.

"I'm sorry ... that I'm like this," Harry blinks and stares at the dawn. "He deserves ... more."

Someone strong. Someone whole. Someone who hasn't been pulled apart by Bellatrix and is barely holding it together.

"He chose you," Magnus says. "You chose one another. It is a reciprocal bond, is it not?"

"Yeah," Harry swallows a little bit of whiskey.

"Then why not trust Theodore with the truth?"

"Because I *need* him to be safe," Harry can't help how sharp his voice feels, dragged out of him. "I am barely holding my shit together and if he ... if he's not safe then I can't ..."

Harry shakes his head, biting his lip.

"Can't what?" Magnus presses gently.

"Control myself," Harry whispers. He lets himself look into Magnus' yellow eyes. Magnus might not be a legilimens but there's something about him, maybe because he's half a Mage, that means Harry feels like Magnus can read his thoughts through a look or a gesture: *If he dies, I will collapse the centre of the fucking earth.*

"Ah," Magnus drags on his cigarette.

"They're all so worried about me being a Dark Lord," Harry shakes his head with a snort. *If only they knew what they really had to worry about.* Theo knows, he's seen Harry almost lose himself in magic ripped out of chaos in the Forbidden Forest. Severus might know too, Harry suspects, because of the nothing-Place. Yet Harry thinks that perhaps nobody will know as clearly as Magnus will.

"Yes, Wixen do prefer to focus their fear on a notion they think they have at least a tiny chance of beating," Magnus says drily. "After all, learning that you could wipe out all life is a little hard to process."

"I don't know if I could do that," Harry says. "Kreacher thinks I could, but I don't know."

I only know that if Theo dies, I will want to.

"It will hurt to keep pulling away like this, Little Mage," Magnus says, his voice stern. "It will hurt both him and you."

"Pain is just pain," Harry says firmly, running his toe along the edge of the flagstone path. "There are worse things."

"What is the worst thing?" Magnus asks gently.

Harry thinks of how the bond feels now, the tightness of it. It's uncomfortable, it fucking hurts, but at least it is there. He can't imagine how unbearable it would be to feel nothing. Like how he feels now Sirius is dead, now the parabatai bond is completely mute and painless. Empty. With Theo, Harry knows it would feel a million times worse, a million times more empty. *What would be the point of living with that emptiness?*

"I can't lose him, Mags," Harry whispers.

“Then don’t,” Magnus says simply. “Say sorry. Start there. I’ve always found it works wonders, except with vampires. In those instances, a little distance is required. Sometimes a stake also.”

Harry laughs and twists to press his face into Magnus' side. Like this, with the hint of tobacco in the air and breathing in the smell of leather, he can almost imagine it is Sirius.

"Mags?"

"Yes?"

Harry lets his silence fill him for a moment until it is so unbearable he must speak or suffocate.

"Does it get any easier?" Harry whispers, his eyes squeezed tight shut and eyelids pressed against cool leather. "The longer we live? Losing people?"

"It becomes bearable in some cases. Sometimes I fear it becomes too easy to simply stand by whilst a whole life is lived and lost without my notice or grief," Magnus' voice is wistful. "But the ones you love? No. It does not get easier, little Mage."

Harry hears Luna's voice in his head. *Everyone you love will die and you will live to see it.* Harry feels a sense of despair blossoming inside him like oil spilling into a lake. If he lives, which Severus and Remus and everyone seems intent on him doing, then no matter what he does, he'll have to watch Theo die. One day. No matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries. Just like he watched Cedric and Sirius die. He'll have to do it, over and over again, just like Magnus has done. He feels Death's cold breath on his ear: *we are coming, Master.*

"Then I really don't want to live forever," Harry chokes out a laugh, trying to ignore the tears sprouting in the corners of his eyes.

"I know." Magnus truly sounds like he does. "I promise you will not be alone."

Harry sighs. He remembers his first ever conversation with Sahara. *It is right to be alone.* Maybe, Harry thinks wearily, everyone is alone.

What's the point? Harry thinks, staring up at the fading stars. *What's the point of any of it if everyone dies anyway?*

You are the point, Master, Death whispers back. Harry shivers.

“Voices in your head again?” Magnus asks quietly.

“Always,” Harry says, choking on despair. Yet the words pour out anyway. “How do you keep going? How do you keep loving people and losing them and ... living anyway?”

“Hmm,” Magnus thinks slowly. He sets down the mug and brings up a spare hand to stroke Harry's curls. Harry closes his eyes. “Because though it is agony it is also wondrous to live.”

“Is it?” Harry whispers drowsily. “Not so sure.”

“I know,” Magnus whispers. “But just think - If I had given up all those years ago when I wanted to, I would not be here now, feeling how wondrous it is to know another immortal being who is the most like me again after such a long time of waiting. When my father died I thought I would never feel it again.”

“I get that,” Harry murmurs. After Cedric, he thought he would never feel that way about anyone. Now there is Theo. When he first met Sirius, he never thought he would have another adult in his life who loved him as much or defended him as fiercely. Now there is Remus to love him and Severus to defend him.

You are shedding, Sahara whispers inside his mind. You need your true heart.

“I know you do,” Magnus smiles against Harry’s hair. Harry can smell the smoke on his lips and the scent of his magic, ancient and comforting. “Remember this: many things are worth living a long time for, Mr Potter. Your bond is one of them. For me, us being two mages here together is another. Or one and a half Mages, more precisely.”

Harry smiles softly. He thinks of how amazing the bond feels when he touches Theo. Like flying and freedom and safety all at once. *Many things are worth living a long time for.*

“I’m glad you’re here,” Harry says softly, rubbing his cheek against Magnus’ jacket. “I’m glad you lived long enough to find someone else like you. To find me.”

“So am I, little Mage,” Magnus whispers, blowing smoke up towards the dawn. “So am I.”

— — —

I’m sorry.

What are you sorry for? That you sent me away against my will or that you won’t tell me where you are?

I’m not allowed to tell you where I am, it’s under goblin protection and yes, I am sorry that I hurt you.

That’s not the same as being sorry that you did it.

I’m not sorry you have a shield. I’m not sorry he shielded you.

Who shields you?

Plenty of fucking people. I’m in shield-like people up to my bloody eyeballs.

It's meant to be me.

You're more than a shield. You're mine.

I'm your what?

Just mine. Like I'm yours.

Are you? Still?

Always.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: [@elphreads](#)

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Narcissa's Plea

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (child abuse references)

Surprise chapter! (Because tomorrow's chapter was too effing long).

This time, Harry learns about magic.

Next time, Draco. (That's it. Just Draco. He's his own explanation. He brings his own chaos.)

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

"So we're going to pretend I'm the Black Lord apparent to everyone else?"

"Yes." Bane says. "Because there are some who might manipulate the youngest Lord in a few centuries."

"But I am the Black Lord?" Harrison clarifies. "The Black Prince said I was."

"Oh yes," Bane smiles. "I am your servant in every way."

"Okay. Can I have sparkles on top of the black?"

"Definitely."

Severus smiles to overhear his child's conversation with Bane. Harrison slept for a few hours this morning and Weasley left by the time the sun had risen. They have been trying to have a calm Sunday, a brief two days of respite before the storm. Severus is tending to the overgrown herb garden that has been left unattended for too long, enjoying the steady rhythm of cutting back and picking. Bane and Harrison are sitting on the old bench in the garden as Bane instructs him about the politics of being a new Lord and paints Harrison's nails. Whenever Severus looks up and catches sight of his son in the hand-knitted Mrs Evans sweater, looking down at his black nails, he has a joyful, poignant flash of Lily. Lupin is inside, enjoying creating havoc with Severus' carefully organised books before supper. Both he and Lupin are feeling the unexpected benefit of having Magnus Bane once more in occupation: he makes Harrison happy. When Severus was brewing in the basement earlier today, he heard raucous laughter echoing down the stairs. Bane is combining a syllabus of helping Harrison utilise his extraordinary power with, from what Severus heard drifting downstairs, a steady stream of historical and political gossip and obscure games. How can Severus begrudge the smile it brings to his child's face? Especially when the child goes to Surrey the day after tomorrow. *Right now, the sun is shining. Right now, he is here and safe.*

"Little Mage, do you understand elemental magic?" Bane asks, his fringe flicking forward as he fixes his gold eyes on Harrison's fingernails.

"Nope," Harrison quips, then swings his eyes around to Severus. "Oh wait! Isn't that what Hermione called the Potter magic when it made the griffin? Y'know, when I got my ring back that time?"

"Yes," Severus says, quietly snipping some nepeta leaves and putting them into his foraging basket. "Miss Granger expressed the standard textbook understanding that magic takes tangible forms when it is elemental."

"Ah, yes, that's the case for most Wixen," Bane says, giving Severus the flicker of a wink. Severus scowls. "Less so for you, little Mage."

"Is elemental magic hard, then?" Harrison frowns. Severus could roll his eyes at the careless ignorance of this comment if there wasn't a flicker of pride that his child, his and Lily's child, is so magically intuitive.

"It is not hard," Bane said slowly. "Most wixen channel elemental magic in some forms, for instance, the Patronus charm relies on elemental magic -,"

"And cannot be performed by many grown wixen," Severus couldn't help but add in.

"Is that really true?" Harrison asks with a sceptical expression.

"Just because your Mage abilities have given you a natural aptitude that allowed you to perform the charm at thirteen, does not mean you are the rule. You are the exception," Severus says.

"Fucking telling me," Harrison mumbles.

"Language," Severus says, lightly snipping the flower off a wayward echinacea plant.

"Severus used the right phrase there," Bane says. "Natural aptitude. Fae and Goblins, for instance, nearly always use elemental magic because they are intrinsically connected to the elements. Mages have a good sense of elemental magic because they too are more connected to the elements than other Wixen."

"That's not completely correct. The theory of Mages is that whilst all wixen have the possibility to be connected to the raw capacity of elemental magic, only Mages have the ability to access it in its fullest, truest form. It is not that they are more connected, it is that they are more aware of the connection we all could inherently possess." Severus doesn't realise he has spoken, the lessons of Eileen throughout his young life tripping off his tongue.

"Severus," Bane says, smiling slowly. "You are an expert."

"And you are an irritant," Severus says drily.

"Huh," Harrison says thoughtfully, staring at Severus. "That's why I could make the griffin, the raven, the basilisk and the wolf with the magic? And why you can make the library with our magic?"

"Yes," Bane nods. "Although you do not make them so much as call them from one plane of existence to another."

"Excuse me, a basilisk?" Severus says, glaring at Harrison.

"Big surprise, the Slytherin magic loves snakes," Harrison rolls his eyes. "So you can do elemental magic?"

"I can," Severus says, turning his hand to picking mint leaves.

"How?" Harrison asks. Severus resists the age-old urge to brush the boy off for his natural, incessant inquisitiveness. He remembers how it felt to have Harrison gone, to think there were tales and secrets and words he would never share with him.

"Is your varnish dry?" Severus asks. He can feel Bane smiling at him and Severus tries to glare at him.

"Yep," Harrison says, looking down at his fingers.

"Then assist me."

Harrison hops off the bench, leaving Bane on the bench sipping a cup of coffee that Severus is sure is spiked with something (because Bane seems unable to consume beverages that are not alcoholic) and padding across the grass in his bare feet. Severus hadn't immediately noticed that his child has taken on the appearance of a new romantics fan from twenty years ago - an oversized cream shirt with ruffled cuffs and leather trousers that Severus is sure must have come directly out of Magnus' wardrobe. With the black nail varnish and the runes and now the tattoo, Severus has the uncomfortable sensation of his child taking on the appearance of some of his teenage musical idols. He scowls at Bane. Severus knows exactly who is to blame for this, but Bane simply smirks into his cup of coffee.

"Just the leaves?" Harrison asks, standing by the mint bush.

"Yes," Severus says, beginning to pick again. "Ask your questions about elemental magic."

"I thought you said it was hard, that other people can't do it," Harrison frowns, "but you can make a Patronus, so can loads of people."

"Not corporeally."

"You can," Harrison looks at him sharply. "Dumbledore can. Narcissa can. Remus can."

Severus pauses on the edge of trying to explain to his child how exceptional he is.

"I was sixteen when I learned how to produce it corporeally," Severus says quietly. "It is part of the NEWT syllabus. I and Lily and a boy called Edgar Bones were the only ones who could produce a corporeal Patronus, with animal form, for the exam. Lily was a charms prodigy, her natural aptitude made it easy for her to learn when we began our seventh year. She worked hard," Severus smiles slightly to remember the days they spent in fifth year, trying to cast the charm effectively by the Black Lake. *Before I ruined our relationship entirely.* "Edgar Bones had heir magic that naturally flowed that way. We had the most corporeal casters in our class for generations. For example, I believe in this year's cohort, only Angelina Johnson was able to produce a corporeal Patronus for her final exam."

"Yeah, because I taught her," Harrison mumbles, tugging mint leaves from the stem. "I taught all of the DA before we were caught."

"How many others can produce it?" Severus asks, after a small pause of amazement.

"Um ..." Harrison frowns. "Luna, Ginny, Colin Creevey, Neville, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Susan Bones -,"

"How many corporeal? Aside from yourself?" Severus demands, mind reeling at the implication for the Charms NEWT class. *Filius will be out of his mind with joy.*

"Oh, only two," Harrison says as if that is not in itself remarkable. "Hermione has an otter and Luna has a hare. But the others are coming along."

"The others?" Severus asks, faintly.

"I think Ginny's is a horse but it's kind of still finding its form," Harrison says, suddenly sounding very animated as he picks mint. His face has taken on a fond expression. "Ron's is still coming, but it's definitely furry. Fred and George's have wings, so that's cool, I'm sort of hoping they have ravens, like the House of Black. It's funny what you say about the Bones magic because Susan's was one of the first to kind of have a shape, though it hasn't settled properly yet. I'm glad Angelina got hers. It was only legs before I ... went away. She must have been practising."

"You enjoy teaching," Severus says. He tries not to sound amazed. Harrison looks at him sharply, as if seeking out a rebuke and then shrugged carelessly.

"Not really. Hermione made all the lesson plans and all that stuff, I just ... I like sharing magic," Harrison mumbles. "Everyone always says I'm special but ... it's just a spell, right? It's meant to be learned. They learnt it. It's not hard."

"It is," Severus says flatly. "The Patronus charm is, in fact, very hard."

"Can't be," the child rolls his eyes in an annoying fashion. "Dumbledore, Remus, Kingsley, Narcissa, Tonks, Arthur, Sirius -,"

"Can you continue that list?" Severus snaps. "Because your godfather was an animagus - they reportedly have a natural aptitude for the casting of patronuses, Narcissa is the only one in the Death Eater's circle apart from myself who can cast it, Shackbolt and Nymphadora are Aurors - a profession that requires the ability, Lupin is a genius, Albus is the Supreme Mugwump for a reason and Arthur ..." Severus takes a small breath. "Arthur was an extraordinary wizard in his own right."

Harrison stares at him for a moment and then swallows hard. Severus regrets instantly bringing the moment of Harrison's capture and witness of Arthur's death to mind. Yet Harrison seems to be shaking it off, his eyes taking on a distinct quality of his thinking magic and a scowl pulling down on his brow.

"Yeah, I can extend the list actually," Harrison says churlishly, holding up sprigs of mint to make his point. "Hermione. Luna. Angelina."

"And they may be the future of Magical Law Enforcement, the Order of the Phoenix or magical academic research," Severus says. "They may be the exceptions."

"Or maybe you're wrong," Harrison says sharply, and then hisses something that definitely sounds rude under his breath. Severus tries to exercise some goodwill. The child is exhausted, after all, they are all exhausted and today is meant to be a day of at least a hint of rest.

"There may be something in the way you teach it," Severus says, as neutrally as possible. "Or it may be that we simply misjudge the proper age at which to learn a Patronus, but the point is elemental magic is a complex branch of magic that many wixen struggle to grasp -,"

"You learned." Harrison interrupts, sharp green eyes fixed on Severus. "At sixteen. How did you learn?"

"My mother," Severus says quietly. "She taught me much magic early. Earlier than other children. I came into my family inheritance as a young child, I had to learn to wield."

"Because of the nothing-place?" Harrison asks, checking over his shoulder, but Bane has gone inside. "Because of the shadows and secrets?"

"Yes," Severus admits. "Though there were more immediate benefits to her."

"Why?" Harrison asks.

Severus remembers.

Eileen's face is drawn as she rocks, sitting in a ball at the bottom of the stairs. A blue bruise is flowering over her cheek and she won't stop scratching her arms.

"Annem?" Severus whispers, twelve years old, unsure of himself. "It's okay, Annem, let me make the darkness go away. Expecto - Expecto Patronum!"

A thin, trembling wisp of silver light erupts from his wand. It has no shape, no form, but it's enough. It's enough to stop the scratching.

"Oh, farzandam," she whispers, eyes reflecting the silver mist back to him. "What a little Prince you are."

"Annem, my mother, she often ... suffered," Severus said slowly. "The Patronus charm, even without corporeal form, can provide some limited relief to that kind of ... mental anguish."

Harrison's eyes fix on him.

"Tobias," he mutters. Severus is oddly despairing and relieved that his child understands so well. He nods curtly.

"I thought her name was Eileen," Harrison frowns. "Who's arrnem?"

There is something powerful, Severus realises, about hearing his mother's tongue on his son's.

"It means mother in her tongue," Severus says, holding out his basket so Harrison can deposit his mint leaves.

"You don't call it yours?" Harrison raises his eyebrows. "I thought we were Turkish?"

"We are British," Severus says, factually. "I am British with Arab-Turkish heritage. You have that from me, but you also have Korean from your mother's father."

"That's a lot of things," Harrison frowns. "How did that happen?"

The boy does not realise what he is asking for, the important and wondrous moment of Severus' child asking for his family history, but Severus feels as if a stinging smart is taking place inside his ribs. *Our family tree. Our line. Our secrets.*

"Your birthday," Severus' voice is hoarse and curter than he wishes. "Ask for your secret. On your birthday."

Harrison looks at him steadily for a moment and then shrugs. He continues to pick leaves thoughtfully.

"So you're saying you're good at elemental magic because you did a lot more learning than everyone else," Harrison says slowly. "So people can learn hard, they can have a really natural skill or they can have natural heir magic. Doesn't that mean that everyone could do exactly what I do if they just, like, worked really hard?"

Severus both enjoys and is frustrated by the innocence of that question.

"No, Harrison," he says patiently.

"Why?" Harrison demands in irritation. "I taught the DA to do Patronuses, so why couldn't I teach them to talk to magic or hear the songs?"

Severus takes a moment to admire the simultaneous humility and arrogance in a child who looks at his own impossibility and assumes that all the rest of the world must be capable of the impossible too.

"How would you go about teaching them to produce a Patronus like your own, fully sentient and tangible?" Severus asks. "Do you know how it happens?"

"No, but I could work it out," Harrison says stubbornly, jutting out his chin in a way that is pure Lily. "Then I could teach them."

"You could teach them but they would not have the capacity to put it into form," Severus says. "No matter how hard they worked, there is a ceiling."

"Why?" Harrison exclaims, stripping a stem of mint in fury.

"Because we are all limited," Severus says wryly. "Do you ever wonder why it is that one child can cast one spell perfectly whilst another cannot? It is not always will. It is not always talent. It is not always hard work."

"Yeah, like Neville," Harrison mutters, then fixes his eyes on Severus. "Why does it happen?"

"It is not completely known," Severus muses, enjoying the thoughts in his mind and the sun on the back of his neck. It is a luxury, he realises, to be able to talk to Harrison like this; unhurried and comfortable in one another's presence. He remembers the question game they played in the past, the way information was extracted like teeth. *How fucking far we have come*. He allows himself to relish it, just for a millisecond. "There is something in the magic of the brew or the spell that responds to one child with more vigour than others, where for another child it shall not respond at all, or only a little. As birds are better fliers than fish, as my Potions Master used to say."

"But we evolved," Harrison says, green eyes earnest. "Like, all the Darwin stuff, right? We learned to walk, birds learned to fly. Why can't people change?"

Severus stares at his child. This is why he thinks Harrison is dangerous to the Wixen world. After all, change is not something that the Wixen world relishes, yet Harrison brings transformation

everywhere he goes. *What world could Harrison bring into being, if he had the desire to do so?* It is worrying and, in many ways, hopeful.

"People can," *I hope to Circe they can*, Severus thinks. "but evolution happens over millennia. The type of magic you are capable of wielding -,"

"Don't say wielding, it sounds weird," Harrison wrinkles his nose. "I'm not forcing magic to do anything."

"Precisely. Most of our modern understanding of magic is based on transactional, utilitarian philosophy, not relational," Severus says quietly. "In terms of the evolution of our species, you and the way that you interact with magic is an example of either a prehistoric remnant or a phenomenon aeons in the future. Just as you cannot teach your Defence Association to be a Fae or a Goblin, you cannot teach them to be you. You are completely different."

"I'm a Creature," Harrison mutters quietly. "I'm a Mage. I'm ... weird."

It is strange to think of his child this way, that he and Lily could produce a being so like them in so many ways and yet so completely different. Yet if this type of self-definition helps Harrison understand himself, Severus will not deny it. Still, Severus does not want Harrison to indulge in the same kind of self-loathing of his otherness that has plagued Lupin for most of his life.

"You are a teenager," Severus drily, and Harrison smirks gratefully.

"Are all teenagers weird?" he says jokingly.

"They have always seemed so to me," Severus says flatly and Harrison snorts, shooting Severus an amused glance. "You are an enigma of a teenager to be sure. As such, you are not the same as others. You cannot teach fish to fly, *farzandam*. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harrison shakes his head. "I understand you basically called me a wooly mammoth before. Or an alien."

Severus shakes his head and chuckles at the boy, who looks utterly startled.

"Would you not prefer to think of it as a tyrannosaurus or a ... jedi?" Severus says, tilting his head at his son with his eyebrows raised. Harrison looks as if he could catch flies with his open mouth but he shuts it and smirks, reluctantly.

"That's a bit better," he mutters, furrowing his brow. "So you're saying ... even though other wixen can do elemental magic, they can only do the kind of elemental magic that suits *them* ? Like if they're a fish and they do elemental fish magic, people are capable of learning and doing that, but if it's flying magic and they're a fish, then it won't work? Even if they worked really, really hard?"

"They may be able to perform," Severus corrects gently. "But they would not flourish in the magic, not as you do. We know that *Anzars*, for instance, are able to perform some elements of goblin magic -,"

"Yeah, Bill's been teaching me," Harrison frowns. "You're saying we'll never be as good as the Goblins?"

Severus sighs and thinks of another way to frame it.

"We are all limited," he says quietly. "We cannot all excel in all areas. Your Miss Granger is an incredibly proficient brewer but she shall never be a Master. Mr Nott, however, undoubtedly shall. There is no difference in their grades, but Theodore's mother taught him young and the Nott magic is healing magic, which is very compatible with Potions. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah." Harrison picks leaves thoughtfully. For a moment, they are quiet, stripping leaves from the bush and dropping them into the basket. The birds sing in the golden afternoon, the orange orb of the sun beginning to descend behind the house and leaving long shadows across the grass. The world, for a blessed moment, could contain none of the horrors it does. "You think that because I'm a Mage I don't have a ceiling. Not like other people do."

"Not precisely," Severus says, after a moment of thought. After all, limitless capability is dangerous. Most of all to Harrison. "I do not know what your ceiling is. Nobody does. Yet."

"It's because of the Death stuff, right?" Harrison asks worriedly.

"Not alone," Severus says simply. "As a child, you were essentially magically stunted, only able to use your natural abilities to save your own life."

"Once," Harrison mumbles mulishly. "It happened once."

"That I know of and you remember," Severus says sharply. He remembers Lupin's words on the night Harrison disappeared: *how many times?* It would take months of wilful Occlumency to answer that question and Severus doesn't think Harrison trusts him enough for that, even if they had the time for it, which they do not. "If you had grown up in a magical household it would have been different. You would have been" *loved, cherished, valued, celebrated.* "Monitored."

"So Mum would have known my ceiling, she would have realised," Harrison mutters. Severus notices that in Harrison's imagination of what his magical childhood looks like, it is only Lily who is parenting. *When did he stop imagining Potter? Could he ever imagine me as his childhood caretaker?*

"Undoubtedly," Severus says quietly. "Lily would have."

"What was her Patronus?"

Severus sees no reason to lie. The child has seen inside his memories, for Hades' sake. He knows how important Lily was.

"A doe," Severus answers. Harrison's head shoots up.

"Like yours?" he asks.

"Similar," Severus says. *Except now mine has your eyes.*

"Huh," Harrison doesn't sound insulted. He must know, after all, that Potter's Patronus was a stag. "They can change, right? Like how Prongs, my Prongs, is changing?"

"They can change," Severus says. "Before your mother's death, mine preferred the form of a kingfisher."

Like Eileen's, Severus thinks.

"Really? Like the birds you did in the spell? Like the birds I made with the Prince magic that time with Narcissa?" Harrison asks without guile, obviously not realising how much it had mattered to Severus that Harrison's first elemental form with the Prince magic represented Eileen to him. "What makes them change? I thought it was meant to be love or something?"

"I assume that came from Albus," Severus says derisively, for he knows Lupin would never teach something so insipid. "No, the Patronus is not made of love. It is made of our most treasured thoughts and memories, no matter what memory we may use to draw it to mind at the time. What we treasure can change depending on circumstance."

"You treasured your memories with Mum more when she was gone," Harrison says quietly, almost speaking to himself. "Prongs started to change after I found out that James was James."

Severus honestly does not know what to say. It makes sense, of course, that the child's most treasured memory up to this point would be the scant knowledge and perhaps even buried memories he may still hold of the parents who nurtured him before the Dark Lord's attack, but it is also humbling to imagine a Patronus built on so meagre a foundation. At least Eileen had loved Severus, imperfectly, for thirteen years. Before Severus can speak, he feels a tremor in the wards. Harrison looks up, frowning slightly.

"What can you hear?" Severus asks, mainly out of curiosity. Weasley has tethered the wards to Severus, so of course, he will feel them. He wonders what Harrison, untethered but full of Mage magic, hears and feels.

"A bell," Harrison says, frowning over the boundary of the Spinners End garden. "I can smell ... it's faint, but, like, snow?" Harrison's face clears a moment later. "Narcissa's coming."

Severus watches the gate, hears the pop of apparition and then silver hair appears through the dissolving edge of the wards.

"Superb," Severus mutters to himself, thinking how useful it would be, how marvellous for security magic all over the world, if one could be heralded of danger by smell. He sees the child looking at him in surprise, as if unsure if the praise is sarcastic. "Your instruction from Bane has yielded positive results. You are to be congratulated."

"Jesus," Harrison rolls his eyes and churlishly picks some leaves. "You could just say 'well done.'"

"Well done."

"Oh." Harrison stops picking and a slight blush crawls up his neck then he shrugs. "Whatever."

"Good day," Severus says, as Narcissa unlocks the gate and strides towards them. She has an unusual and worriedly stoic look on her face. "Cissa?"

"My Lord," Narcissa says, kneeling on the grass in front of Harrison. "I must beseech you for clemency on behalf of my son."

Oh fuck. It's happening. Severus knows at that moment that he was a fool to hope they could have at least one day of peace. The storm is coming from all directions. He swears he can hear thunder in the distance.

"Cissa," Severus barks, glaring at his old friend. "We discussed this."

Not now. He's not ready. I am not ready.

"Discussed what?" A sharp voice says from the doorway. Lupin and Bane are standing there. Bane has a cafetiere of coffee and is emptying most of it into Lupin's cup as if he thinks copious amounts of caffeine will avert Lupin from displeasure at Severus keeping things from him.

"Circumstances have changed," Narcissa says, her eyes flashing up to catch Severus'. Her voice is barely above a whisper. "She is teaching him."

Severus feels a jerk in his stomach. He knows what that means. *Bellatrix is teaching my godson the killing curse.*

"Who?" Harrison asks. "What's going on?"

"It seems Fleur Blanche has concern over her son's wellbeing," Bane says, leaning against the doorframe. "She is asking for you to name him as a protectee of the House of Black."

"Malfoy? Draco Malfoy?" Harrison stares at all the adults around him as if they are all mad, then his gaze fixes on Narcissa. "I don't understand, you get that he hates me, right? Like, literally, he would hand me over to Voldemort, if he could?"

Severus can't help a small twinge at his jaw at that. He remembers Narcissa confessing to him that Draco has a task to do for the Dark Lord. Unfortunately, Lupin is looking at him at that exact moment and his eyes flash dangerously amber. Severus sighs inwardly. There is a real chance he shall have to endure a werewolf berating before he is allowed to climb into bed tonight.

"My son is soon to join the ranks of the Dark Lord," Narcissa whispers, holding Harrison's gaze with her cold blue eyes. "Allow him to survive, my Lord. Allow me to save my child."

Severus watches his child stare at Narcissa and feels as if he cannot move. He can feel Lupin's angry eyes upon him but it makes no difference, he is taut as a bowstring, staring at his child, waiting for the response.

Please, Severus finds himself wildly thinking. Please help us save Draco.

"I don't -," Harrison winces and takes a shuddering breath, rubbing his forehead scar so that it breaks slightly, smearing red blood across his forehead. "What do you want me to do? I can't have a literal fucking death eater in the House of Black, I've got enough sodding trouble with Bellatrix."

"If he is under your care then the Dark Lord will likely reject him," Narcissa says quietly, not looking at Severus. He still understands her meaning. *And hopefully, he will also reject him from the task of potentially trying to kill my child.* "Then I can remove him safely from this country."

"Lucky Malfoy," Harrison shakes his head. Severus cannot fault his child's bitterness. After all, Severus and Lupin have discussed it endlessly and if they could extricate their child from the war, they would. It is a little harder, however, when your child is in the fucking centre of it all. They both know that all that would happen if Harrison left the country is that the war would stretch to consume him elsewhere. "What if he doesn't reject him? Then he's, what? Like a spy? It's not like it's unprecedented."

Harrison's eyes fall on Severus. He is not sure he can speak or if he should speak. Harrison is his son. Severus' life now orbits around his well-being. Draco is Severus' godson. He loves him.

"If you took him under your sanctuary as Lord Black, he would not be able to betray you," Severus says quietly. He can feel Lupin glaring at him.

"The flip side of that is Voldemort may kill young Malfoy for his betrayal," Lupin snaps. "Harry shouldn't have to take the burden of that."

"He will not kill him if it is not his choice," Narcissa says quietly. "The Dark Lord knows that a child underage cannot be held to account if a Lord of a Noble and Ancient House decides to enact a protection clause over of the young wixen in their house -,"

"So you want it to be Harry's idea, Harry's fault?" Lupin steps down into the garden, glaring at Narcissa. "Keep your fingerprints off it?"

"It is not for shame if that is your suggestion," Narcissa's eyes flash dangerously at the wolf. "My child only survives if I do."

"He has a living father," Lupin growls and glares at Severus. "We need to talk."

"Wait," Harrison says wearily. "Before you start fighting just ... just wait." Harrison offers his hand to Narcissa. "You don't have to ... do that."

She accepts and rises. Harrison gestures for them to move over to the bench, sitting side by side. With Narcissa wearing her usual long, black victorian gown and Harrison looking like a cross between a 70's rocker and an 18th Century poet, Severus has the absurd notion that the two of them are utterly out of time, one light and one dark, seated together.

"I'm sorry," Harrison says quietly, "but you don't know what he's like with me. He ... he really loves his Dad and ..."

"Draco is young, Harry, and has none of your wisdom, he covets power in a way that you do not. I hope that being taken under your Lordship, being part of what we are, who we are together -" Narcissa offers Severus' child her hand. He takes it, letting Narcissa's black ring on her right hand press against the black diamond on his left hand. There is a small ball of white light that glows softly where the stones meet. Narcissa's expression is suddenly tender. "- might teach him differently."

"I can't ... like, honestly, you mean a lot to me and you're, you know, you're a daughter of the House of Black so I feel this, I dunno," Harrison frowns as he stumbles over his words, looking down at their joined hands, "like, protectiveness around you?"

"That is normal," Bane says softly. "Those in the house of the new Lord often feel the same."

"I do," Narcissa confirms quietly. Harrison nods but doesn't stop staring at their hands.

"But I ...," Harrison swallows. "You know I can't feel that for Malfoy, right? It would totally fuck me over at school. Look, I'm really trying not to be a dick, but -," the boy's eyes find Severus' and Lupin's in turn. "You know what he's like, I only got through this year without spending every fucking week in the hospital wing because I can be invisible! It's just ..."

"Untenable," Lupin snaps. "Utterly untenable."

"It is not essential that you are ... bonded to Draco in the same way you are bonded to Narcissa." Severus speaks softly, trying not to look at Lupin. "There is also the fact that if he is under your protection, he can no longer curse you."

"Can't or shouldn't?" Harrison narrows his eyes. "Because what if, like, I feel protective of him and can't hurt him because he's mine like Narcissa is -,"

"Harry, please don't talk about people like that," Lupin snaps. "They are your family, not *yours*."

"I'm not being a prat, but they are! I'm their Lord, they are my responsibility!" Harrison objects. The white light surrounding Narcissa's hand glows brighter. "Tell them, Mags!"

Severus and Lupin look at Bane who smiles wryly and does not seem confused.

"Harry's Lordship is just like the Lordships I remember when I was a lad," Bane says. "Vassal bonds, service bonds, fealty bonds, family bonds, they are all there. Unlike modern Lordships which generally only maintain family bonds, Harry's Lordship naturally rears the others too."

"What does that mean?" Lupin asks tersely. He and Severus catch one another's gaze. It is just another way their child is extraordinary, another thing they need to learn to protect.

"I don't have any family bonds in the house of Black. I don't ... make those kinds of relationships easily, I only have three," the child says tersely. His eyes flicker towards Magnus, who nods comfortingly. Severus realises that in between the jokes and the magic lessons, Magnus Bane may have begun to plunge into the depths of his child's trauma. "So the Black magic helps me create something that's not quite family but still strong."

"Service bonds, Fealty bonds," Lupin says, looking at Harrison intensely. "Only three bonds ... Padfoot?"

Harrison shakes his head tersely. *Three*. Severus knows the answer to the question not asked: *Lupin. Ronald. Granger*. Severus is not surprised he does not make the list and is not hurt by it either.

"Who?" Lupin asks quietly. Harrison sighs heavily.

"Hermione," the child says quietly. "You and ..."

His voice drifts away. His eyes flutter to Severus and then dive away. Severus feels a clenching inside him that he didn't expect, as if all of the oxygen inside of him is being wrenched out. The child hasn't said it, it's possible he's embarrassed that it *isn't* Severus but there's also a possibility that it is. *A third family bond. It could be me*. Severus shakes himself. It is probably Ronald and the look was merely a coincidence. Whatever he is to the child barely matters, not since Severus learned that Harrison thinks of where Severus is as home. *That is enough*.

"So those in the House of Black *are* Harry's," Bane affirms softly. "The Twins have a service bond, Fleur Blanche is fealty bonded, if I had to wager I'd say that Andromeda and Nymphadora have vassal bonds."

"They won't like that," Narcissa mutters.

"Oh, vassal bonds have been given a poor reputation because of Gellert," Bane waves his hand in irritation.

"Did you know him?" Narcissa asks curiously.

"I know everyone," Bane says glibly. Severus rolls his eyes. "When I grew up, I was a vassal to the crown as much as everyone else."

"When you grew up, we cut off people's heads as a method of justice," Lupin snarls.

"To be fair, Moony, you did rip a guy's spine out," Harrison mutters.

"And I would do it again for you but it is not without its cost," Lupin's eyes are vividly amber. "That is what I am concerned with. The cost of this arrangement."

"Well, I don't ..." Harrison sighs. He looks at Bane. "Do you wanna throw some Steward stuff in here?"

"You bind more naturally than most," Bane muses softly, as if this is merely interesting and not something that keeps Severus and Lupin up at night, fretting over the god-damned fidelity bond. "So I imagine it is more about ensuring that if the protection clause is triggered, it is triggered in a way that protects you from an overwhelming urge to protect your vassal. As well as protecting you from young Malfoy's ill intentions."

"You reckon I could do that?" Harrison asks doubtfully.

"Easily," Bane says. Harrison bites his bottom lip worriedly. He has not let go of Narcissa's hand.

"I don't want to ever deal with him," Harrison says tensely. "I mean it, *ever*. Magnus is the Steward, he'll deal with anyone who's got the name Malfoy attached to them."

"That would be better anyway," Narcissa says. Severus sees the way she squeezes his son's hand. "No one should suspect what is between us."

"Okay." Harrison looks like he is thinking very hard and then he looks up at Magnus. "What do we need?"

Severus was not aware of how much he had been holding his breath for his godson. It's dizzying, the fact that he might be able to protect Draco too. *I might be able to protect both of the children I care for.*

"Usually, a lot more than we have here but since we have a conjuring circle and two runes experts on hand, we could probably make quick work of it now," Bane sips his coffee. "Especially if Fleur Blanche is happy to provide some blood?"

"Of course," Narcissa says.

"Stop." Lupin's voice is a growl. Severus sees how Narcissa stiffens, how Harrison looks at his godfather worriedly and Bane rolls his eyes drolly. Lupin's amber eyes fix on Severus. "We need to talk."

"Very well," Severus nods lightly and looks at his son. "Show Bane and Narcissa to the basement, Harrison."

"Do nothing until I am there," Lupin snaps. Harrison looks warily between the two of them and then nods, still holding Narcissa's hand as he walks towards the house, Narcissa gently helping him as he walks unsteadily over the stones amongst the long grass in his bare feet.

"I enjoy your nail varnish, Harry," Narcissa says quietly as they walk.

"It's Magnus'," the child says as they go in. "Hey, you don't happen to have any green, do you? I was thinking of green stripes, like Beetlejuice."

"Is that a type of beverage?"

"Um, no ... He's a demon -,"

"Severus has been letting you summon demons?"

"Calm down, Fleur Blanche, I can explain -,"

Lupin closes the door on Magnus Bane trying to explain the muggle fascination with daemonology in contemporary culture. He glares at Severus, setting his mug down on the step.

"What are you doing?" the wolf demands lowly.

"I am not doing anything."

"Bollocks," Lupin scoffs. "Why are you letting this happen? This is our child."

"And Draco is my godson," Severus hisses, stepping closer to Lupin. This is not a conversation he wants Harrison to overhear. "I have watched over him since infancy, are you truly going to stand in my presence and ask why I am helping enable his protection?"

"At a cost to *your* child!" Lupin snarls back. "Our child!"

"Harrison is your godson as Draco is mine," Severus snaps back. "Does my position truly elude you?"

"Draco has a father," Lupin says, in a firm, hard voice.

"I see, and you are saying that Harrison does not?" Severus says dangerously.

"No," Lupin lifts a hand and grips the back of Severus' neck, pulling their foreheads together. Severus tries very hard to not be comforted by the feeling of the wolf's breath on his face. "I'm saying that *we* are what he has got. Draco has two parents who love and cherish him and a godfather besides. Harry has us, you heard him, only *three* family bonds. If we don't put him first, we fail him."

"I am putting him first," Severus snaps.

"Explain it to me then," Lupin demands. Severus sighs but Lupin will not move his hand or let him back away.

"The Dark Lord has given Draco a task," he says reluctantly. "A ... murder."

He watches Lupin's eyes widen in understanding.

"Harry," Lupin whispers. "You think he wants him to kill Harry?"

"We don't know," Severus cuts Lupin off, his voice barely above a whisper. "Which is why we need this."

"Why not just take Draco away, let him leave the country?" Lupin whispers back.

"Traitors are punished. This way Draco is not a traitor and Harrison cannot be his target," Severus says simply.

"Merlin, Severus," Lupin sighs. "This is not a tidy plan."

"I know," Severus swallows hard. He knows it is a Hail Mary but it is all they have. "I need to protect them both, Remus."

Lupin sighs and growls.

"It is truly unethical for you to use my name like this," he whispers, his lips ghosting against Severus' as he does before a kiss, but he steps back from Severus with a nod. "Very well. But I'm putting this on the record that I think this is a bad idea."

"Noted," Severus nods. "Thank you."

Lupin shakes his head and gives Severus a distinctly sorrowful look.

"Draco is wilful and aspires to follow Lucius," he says quietly. "There may come a time, *cariad*, when you can't protect them both."

"Then you know what I will choose," Severus says curtly. It's probably not a good time to explain to Lupin that he has vowed to protect Draco from the Dark Lord with his life. Severus thinks there will never be a good time to explain that. "Until then, let me do what I can to avert such a time."

"I'm going to help Narcissa with the rune sequence," Lupin says, sighing heavily. The door opens and Harrison steps out, sleeves rolled up and eyes a little brighter, as they always are when he's been close to the Mage cage. Lupin ruffles the child's hair as he passes and Severus looks at his son.

"Do you need anything, *farzandam*?" he asks.

"No, I just ...," Harrison scowls and looks down at his feet, brushing his big toe against the edge of the front step. "You know it might not work, though, right? Tom's a dick and he might just say Malfoy can be a Death Eater who kills muggleborns but doesn't kill me, right? Tom's pretty territorial over who gets to kill me. So all of this might not stop Malfoy getting a shit tattoo, is all I'm saying."

Severus does not know how the child blends such insightfulness with such youthful babbling, but it always takes Severus back.

"That does not matter," Severus says gently. "Those are his choices, not yours or mine."

"So our choice is ... to stop him from being able to kill me?" Harrison says slowly. "And to make him a kind of useless Death Eater so Tom doesn't fancy him for it as much?"

"The first, certainly, the second, hopefully," Severus says.

Harrison shakes his head and fiddles with his rune necklace, sucking his bottom lip, thoughtfully.

"Do you wish someone had done it for you?" he asks abruptly. "Or for Regulus Black? Do you wish that some kind of family magic or something had made it impossible, I dunno, to sign up with Tom?"

"Yes," Severus says slowly. He remembers how, when Regulus took the mark, he had wished and hoped and actually thought about visiting Black and demanding that he enacted this kind of protection for his brother through the House of Potter. "For Regulus, I wish that very much."

"Okay then," Harrison nods firmly. "Let's do it."

"Harrison," Severus reaches out a hand and sets it steadily on his child's shoulder. "You should not do this for me."

"I'm not," Harrison looks puzzled. "I'm doing it because no one did it for either of us."

Harrison turns and walks into the house and Severus watches him go, lost for words. It is a minor distinction but Severus understands it. After all, this is the reason why he is the only Head of House who organises welfare visits, why each and every one of his first years has an extensive physical exam with Poppy upon entry. *We fill the gaps which we fell through.* No one thought to pull Severus out of a war. No one pulled Harrison out either and it is impossible now to extricate him, no matter how much Severus and Lupin sometimes wish it. The war has been shaped around Harrison. It has not been shaped around Draco. Whilst neither Severus nor Harrison can be drawn out of it, maybe someone else can be. Severus follows his child into the house and downstairs, where he is faced with a truly astonishing sight. Lupin is walking around the edge of the Mage cage with his wand out, muttering in Latin, streams of golden light falling in complicated patterns. On the other side, Narcissa is walking in the opposite direction, marking the ground with runes that seem to catch Remus' gold light and settle in the chalk. She's muttering too. Severus has never seen Runes work like it.

"How are we doing this?" Harrison asks nervously.

"I think it's best if you stand inside the cage, Harry, it should protect some of your power from spilling over," Bane says. *Spilling over and potentially pulling the house down,* Severus thinks sarcastically but says nothing. He watches as Bane scribbles on a piece of parchment but the half-Mage's eyes keep diverting to Narcissa and Remus with admiration. He looks over at Severus and catches his eye. "Have you ever seen them do this?"

"I have not seen them in the same room before," Severus says drily, but he cannot take his eyes off Lupin. He has never seen the doctorate in Runes in action. It is quite something to behold. He watches the way the wolf moves his wand in fluid, beautiful movements, how his eyes follow them with something bordering on reverence. *No wonder he kisses the runes on my chest with such fervour.*

"Lady Malfoy is remarkably skilled," Lupin says under his breath as the two of them seamlessly cross paths, continuing to complete the circle of chalk and light.

"Ambassador Lupin is being modest," Narcissa says, walking to her next point and spreading chalk. "He is exceptional."

Severus wonders if this is the start of a grudging friendship, but then Harrison is stepping over the edge of the conjuring circle. The flaming bars appear Narcissa and Bane stare at them.

"Your mother's creation, Severus?" Narcissa asks quietly.

"Indeed."

"What she intended to trap, you made," Narcissa says, her eyes resting on Severus' face for a moment before flicking to Harrison.

"Told you," Lupin mutters.

"Predestination, wolf," Severus snaps back and Narcissa smirks.

"Excuse me? Who made what?" Harrison says, glaring meaningfully at them from inside the cage. Severus knows the child resents any implication that anyone in the room was at all involved in making Harrison the person he is. Harrison glares at Bane. "Can we get on?"

"Ah, yes, well, you probably should have taken this with you," Bane waves the sheet of paper at Harrison. It can obviously not be passed through bars of literal flame.

"Never mind," Harrison mutters. "Kreacher!"

The elf appears, scowling at them all, the serpent around his neck and a tiny, flowered apron on his body. He is wielding Severus' largest kitchen knife.

"Kreacher was in the middle of catching bird for dinner," the elf snarls and Severus takes pity on the neighbourhood ducks and geese whose numbers continue to deplete the longer Kreacher is in residence. "What does Master want?"

"Can you bring that paper through to me?" Harrison points to the paper.

"Is that possible?" Narcissa asks, eyeing the fiery bars curiously.

"Yeah, he's full of my magic, we have a bond thing going," Harrison shrugs.

"Master is full of Kreacher's magic," Kreacher snorts, snatching the paper from Magnus' hands before fixing his eyes on the fiery bars. "Master will help?"

"Yeah, let me just ..." Harrison stares at the bars and mutters something in parseltongue. With a pop, the elf, snake and child are all encased inside the cage. Severus tries not to twitch. His son carelessly snatches the paper and reaches into his pocket, removing what looks like a jelly snake that the elf enthusiastically bites the head off. "You want me to just speak it, Mags?"

"That would be best, after Narcissa has submitted her plea for clemency and sanctuary," Bane says.

"What will happen?" Harrison asks tersely. Severus can see the tension in his jaw.

"If it is successful and Draco becomes your protectee, then the rune circle should ignite," Severus says, looking to Lupin for more detail. "Correct?"

"Yes," Lupin's voice is even terser than Harrison's. He has his arms crossed and his eyes are fixed upon the rune circle as if it is a predator he wants to disarm. "Probably with white flame, since the

vow shall be taken in the House of Black. Draco will likely feel something. What Harry will feel, I can't say."

"We will find out," Bane says. He turns and looks at Severus and Lupin in turn. "I'm sorry, but this is Black family business. Outsiders aren't permitted."

"Tough," Lupin says just as Severus says "No".

"It is not negotiable," Magnus' voice is light but his gold eyes unflinching. "Either you leave or we cannot proceed, gentlemen."

"Jesus, everyone, I'm *fine*," Harrison rolls his eyes.

"You are fifteen," Severus says.

"Sixteen in less than two weeks," Harrison quips.

"Congratulations," Severus says drily. "Still underage."

Harrison's eyes flicker with a familiar beligerance.

"Yeah?" he juts out his jaw defensively. "Well, you're still a -," he descends into hisses and the elf, who has one hand on Harrison's jeans, cackles loudly.

"Language!" Severus barks. He can almost feel Narcissa smirking behind him since she used to say exactly the same to him when he was fifteen.

"Severus stays," Lupin says abruptly. "I've read the clauses of the House of Black for this type of ritual. Blood relatives only. Well, Severus is Harry's blood. He stays, I go."

"He's right," Narcissa says, eyes flicking to Severus. "He can stay."

Severus says nothing but raises an eyebrow at Harrison who shrugs, carelessly, words inscribed behind his eyes: *You can stay but you're still annoying*. Severus glares at his son and wishes he could return the gesture with: *so are you, you chaos monster* written across his eyes. He turns to the wolf.

"I shall stay," Severus says to Lupin. The wolf nods curtly and smiles at Harrison.

"Behave yourself, cub," he says and then looks at Severus sharply. "Like a *hawk*."

Severus nods and steps aside to let Lupin climb the stairs. As they pass, Lupin's hand catches Severus and squeezes tightly in a wordless warning. They have a plan for every scenario but not this one. If things go wrong with Harrison's magic, they will have to trust their instincts. Harrison catches Severus' eye.

"Ever get the feeling he doesn't trust us?" Harrison quips. Kreacher scowls and slaps the back of Harrison's knee.

"Master must hurry! Kreacher has bird to slay," the elf croaks.

"Well said," Bane grins. "Fleur Blanche? If you could kindly provide the blood needed."

"Of course."

Narcissa summons Severus' paring knife from the potions bench and holds it over her palm. She stands over the golden chalk runes in front of the conjuring circle. She holds Harrison's gaze intently.

"I, Narcissa Black, daughter of the House of Black, who owes my fealty to my Noble and Most Ancient Lord of the House of Black, Harrison, child of the House of Black, do beseech him for clemency on behalf of my child, Draco of the House of Malfoy." Narcissa draws the knife across her palm and lets her blood drip onto the runes. The blood hisses where it lands, white mist erupting and floating up towards the bars of flame. As it does, Severus sees Narcissa's own eyes cloud over for a moment and feels a jerk of trepidation. He knows, suddenly, that this is going to be anything but simple. "Black Prince, will you shelter my son under the wings of your ravens?"

Black Prince. Severus' stomach drops. It is not the traditional vow. Something has happened, Narcissa's eyes look vaguely the way they do when she scrys. Severus tries to catch Harrison's eye but realises he can't. As Narcissa's eyes are white and milky, Harrison's are black and inky. Their Black rings are both glowing. *Oh shit.* Severus takes a jolting step towards them both, but Bane holds him back.

"Wait," Bane says sharply. The Black ring on Magnus' hand is glowing too. "They cannot be interrupted now, either the clemency and sanctuary will be accepted or it won't be."

"Our wings will shelter him, our eyes will watch for him, in our house he will find Sanctuary."

When Harrison speaks, his voice is full of magic. Bane flicks his fingers and a blue shield shimmers between Bane and Severus and the others. Yet the magic in Harrison's voice causes ripples against the edge of the shield. *He's so powerful.*

"Has anyone been teaching him how to control the voice magic?" Bane mutters to Severus.

"Weasley," Severus swallows hard. "He may not be up to the task."

"So it seems," Bane lifts his voice and his hand with the Black ring up towards Harrison. "Black Prince, what conditions shall be set for the child sheltered under your wing?"

"He's not even reading it," Severus whispers. "How does he know -?"

"This is how the first Black Lord, the Black Prince swore, the magic must be giving the words to him," Bane whispers back quickly. *Or the ghost of an ancient Dark Lord is speaking to my son,* Severus thinks bleakly. He will definitely spending some time on the 'apparitions' portion of their daily health check this evening.

"The conditions, Black Prince?" Bane urges.

Harrison and Narcissa are both rigid with magic, fathomless eyes fixed on one another. Inside the cage, the elf stands watch, a little hand clamped on his Master's wrist. The right wrist, Severus notices. He realises then, that the elf is hoping to stop Harrison from shifting into another dimension, or has decided that if he does, Kreacher will be going with him. The serpent is hissing and winding its way up Harrison's arm, fangs bared, as if prepared to bite the Mage it is bonded to in order to help him. Severus is suddenly very glad Lupin is no longer in the room. He would, as Harrison is fond of saying, lose his shit.

"The child we shelter shall not bring blades to our breast or wands to our heart," Harrison rasps out. Severus notices with worry that his left hand is trembling violently under the pulsating light. Kreacher's eyes are fixed on it too and, with a wince, the elf grabs Harrison's right hand and slaps it on top of Kreacher's head. The trembling in Harrison's right hand diminishes a little. "The child will find Sanctuary until we deem it is safe for the child to soar alone. The daughter of the House of Black will raise and nurture and protect the child under our wings."

It is clever wording, Severus thinks. It should protect Harrison from the feelings of responsibility he was worried about being burdened by. Severus should feel relieved but he is taut with worry and questions. *Is he being possessed by a ghost? Is he suffering? Is he communing with the dead?*

"Narcissa Black, daughter of the House of Black, do you accept these conditions on behalf of the child of your blood, Draco of the House of Malfoy?" Bane asks.

"I do. With my blood and my magic, I accept on behalf of the child of my body. My blood is his blood, my word his word, my vow is his vow." Narcissa's voice is filled with magic also. It is not the kind that would penetrate Magnus' shield or even influence Severus' mind, but he feels it, like a dry summer breeze tingling across his face.

"Nearly there," Bane mutters to Severus. His own brows are furrowed as he lifts his voice once more. "Black Prince, have you taken the child for shelter under your wing?"

There is a taut silence. The magic pulsing out from them hits Bane's shield like waves against the sand, causing ripples. Severus no longer knows what he wants. Distantly, he knows he wants Draco to live but watching Harrison tremble under the quaking power of his own magic is almost too much. *The wolf was right*, Severus thinks with a sharp ache, *perhaps the cost is too high*. But what cost is too high for a child he has protected since infancy?

"We have," Harrison whispers. There is an explosion of white light and several things happen at once. The rune circle ignites like a firework, fizzing with blinding sparkles of magic. Severus is blown back with Bane against the potions table, his brew toppling over them, soaking them both with a calming draught. *Apt*, Severus thinks, as Bane diffuses its impact with a swirl of his hand. He also feels something, confusion in the warding of the house and his stomach drops. Has Harrison's power dissolved Weasley's impenetrable wards?

"Severus!" he hears Lupin yell down the stairs. "Why the fuck is the house shaking?"

"Master brings justice!" Kreacher roars like a bullfrog. "When the world is ended, they shall know the house of Black!"

"Shut up, Kreacher," Harrison groans, even though Severus cannot see him through the fog. *He's alive, thank God, he's still here.*

"The wards," Severus grunts, staggering up.

"It's not coming through the wards," Bane says, "it's coming through the conjuring circle."

"Shit," Severus breathes. Of course, he didn't tell Weasley about the circle so of course, Weasley didn't ward it, but conjuring circles are essentially magic portals, drilled through a dimension. Harrison could be pulling anything through, some mythic beast from another realm, so Severus whips out his wand but before Severus can move, he sees Harrison move. A green eyed shadow in the white fog. Then he feels shadows spilling out of his Prince ring, encasing him, hiding him, and

he knows, with sudden clarity, that his son has used the Prince Magic to render him unseen. The reason why is abundantly clear. Harrison hasn't pulled a mythical creature from another dimension through the conjuring circle, he has pulled something much worse. A blonde-haired, terrified boy has appeared in the cage. Severus' godson, who is standing up and staring at the fiery bars, Magnus Bane, his own mother and finally, fixing his eyes on Severus' son.

"Potter," Draco spits, eyes narrowed. "What the *fuck* have you done?"

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Of Sanctuary Clauses and Consorts

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (ACTIVE SUICIDE ATTEMPT/child abuse)

This time, Draco opens a can of worms and Theo gets a talking to.
Next time, Harry prepares to go back to the Dursleys. With a little help.

Next week there will be two chapters posted, Tuesday and Thursday. If you are waiting for some of the tension to ease off with Harry and Theo, wait until Thursday and then read all the chapters. I think this will help a lot.

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

This is the child? The Black Prince's amused voice echoes in Harry's mind. *I see why he needs our shelter. He is a ferrety sort of creature.*

Ferret is actually a bit of a sensitive topic, Harry thinks back, blinking as he stares at Draco because he is Draco now and that is really, really fucking annoying. *Let me deal with this shit.*

All yours honoured Mage.

He hears a distant, receding chuckle and he knows the Black Prince is gone. Harry tries not to miss him. He feels Sahara sliding down his body to the floor. She's invisible, which is definitely smart since Draco knows she's Theo's.

When the cage is lowered, you get yourself as far away from this bullshit as possible, he thinks at her. *Malfoy can't see you here.*

Take care of yourself first, Greenheart.

Harry turns his attention to the problem at hand. Severus is hidden, Harry can't see him but he can still feel the tethers, can feel them shortening as Severus clearly moves around the cage to stand as close to Harry as possible. Magnus is on the outside still, drenched in potion and holding a shield up for some reason, and Narcissa looks exhausted. Her eyes are blue again and her face taut with uncharacteristic worry. She stares at her son.

"Draco," she whispers.

"Mother," Draco, (no, *Malfoy*, Harry will not think of him by his first name) Malfoy's eyes flick to his mother and then he whips out his wand. "Why have you kidnapped me and my mother, Potter?"

Kreacher growls. Sahara hisses. Harry sighs. It's time to play a part. He's literally knackered and feels like the only things keeping him in place are Severus' tether and Kreacher, fizzing magic up

into him through his hand, but he has to do this. He said he would do this. He looks at Magnus.

"I said I wouldn't deal with him," he says flatly. He looks at Narcissa. "Either of them."

"Trust me, Heir Potter-Black, we have no desire to be dealt with," Narcissa says coldly, slipping into the part so well that Harry is vaguely impressed. She rounds on Magnus. "Explain."

"Lord Black has taken under his Sanctuary all wixen not yet of age in the House of Black," Magnus says smoothly, the lie flying off his tongue. "Our apologies, we did not know that the ritual performed would transport you both here. We are happy to send you both on your way at your earliest convenience. Here -," Magnus reaches for an empty beaker on Severus' desk, he clicks his fingers and it glows blue. "A portkey for Malfoy Manor. My apologies for the inconvenience."

"Your apologies are not accepted," Narcissa snatches the portkey from his hands. "You will be hearing from our account manager. Come, Draco."

"How do I get out?" Malfoy asks desperately. Harry sees Narcissa hesitate, sees Magnus stiffen. He realises only Severus will know if there is too much of Harry's magic in Malfoy now to move through it. Harry thinks about Theo, he thinks about the necklace. *Theo has all of me, my whole heart. That's why the Mage cage recognised him. Malfoy's just a bit of a Black.*

"Like this," Harry sighs, grabbing Malfoy's arm and throwing him out of the cage. Malfoy shrieks as he tumbles into his mother's arms, totally unharmed, then spins and growls at Harry.

"Don't touch me, Potter!"

"Not trying to, Malfoy," Harry snaps back, looking at Magnus. "Shall I come out?"

"If you please," Magnus looks at the bars.

"Ready for this?" Harry looks down at Kreacher. He can feel that Sahara is nearby even if he can't see her.

Kreacher sighs and grabs Harry's wrist as if all of this is utterly tiresome.

"Master can open magic cage," Kreacher says. "Then Kreacher can kill the bird."

"It's a specific bird?" Harry frowns down at Kreacher. "It's not a peacock is it?"

"What did that thing do to our peacocks?" Malfoy shrieks.

"Stupid Heir Malfoy," Kreacher scowls then mutters under his breath. "It is a very big bird. Kreacher will eat its eyes."

"As long as I don't have to," Harry mutters back. "You've got some kind of fucking bird vendetta."

"They are tasty," Kreacher grins.

Harry sighs and rolls his eyes.

"Here we go."

Harry lifts a hand and sets it against the flame as he listens to the song of the Mage cage. It is deep, a million words crushed together with smoke. Harry waits until he can taste sulphur in his throat and then lets the words form. *You know me. Let me pass.* He feels the hot burning of the bar taking form underneath his hand, feels the magic of it exploring him, scorching at the runes on his wrists, throat and back. There's a kind of panic in it, a desire to pull away, but Sahara is there to reassure him.

Let it search you, Greenheart. It is only curious.

It hurts.

Sometimes, magic does.

Then the magic is done and Harry can pull the bar aside, letting him and Kreacher and Sahara pass. As they step over the threshold, the cage disappears into the floor. Harry tries not to look around but he sees the open door of the cellar out of the corner of his eye. *Go*, he thinks to Sahara and is pretty sure he hears her hissing her way up the stairs. Malfoy has jerked back in astonishment when Harry is suddenly no longer caged, but still holds his wand out, arm shaking. Harry rolls his eyes.

"Why am I here?" Malfoy whispers shakily. "I was minding my own business, having my hair cut -,"

"Really?" Harry smirks. "Looks shit."

Malfoy's flame ignites like flash paper and he gestures his wand furiously at Harry.

"Don't talk to me about looks!" He snarls. "You think you're such a catch with your fancy rings and ...tattoos -,"

Malfoy seems to have run out of steam, staring at the tattoo on Harry's hand. Narcissa looks as if she is two seconds from cursing her own child and Harry rolls his eyes again.

"At least I'm not a *ferret* ," Harry says rudely. He turns to Magnus as Malfoy blusters. "I'm going upstairs, can you deal with this?"

"Of course, my Lord," Magnus says, bowing his head lightly. Harry knows it's a show but it's still annoying. He wants his Magnus back, the one who lies on Harry's bed with him and tells him about his first kiss in the 16th Century. It turns out that Francis Drake wasn't only a favourite of Elizabeth the 1st.

"Don't ignore me, Potter!" Malfoy screeches.

"Come, Draco," Narcissa says gently, silver hair falling over her face. Harry can tell that she wants to get out before Draco starts to notice things about where they are and see hints of Severus. "I shall explain when we are at home."

"No!" Malfoy yells. "I deserve the truth!"

"You deserve a bludger in the face," Harry mutters, turning towards the stairs.

Maybe it's because Harry is tired and slow, but he doesn't see Malfoy move until it's too late.

"*Reducto!*" Malfoy yells. Harry flinches but white light jumps out of the Black ring on Harry's hand, consuming Malfoy's spell and throwing his wand across the room. Malfoy gasps and bends over his hand. Harry sees a burn spreading across his palm. It's in the shape of a raven. He glares up at Harry. "What did you do?"

Harry ignores him and glares at Magnus, his whole body taut with adrenalin. *I can't do that every time he decides to curse me.*

"You said he wouldn't be able to do that, why can he still do that?" Harry demands.

"He is not without will," Magnus says with a smile. "He can try to cast but it will be fruitless and have consequences."

"Good," Harry says shortly and glares at Malfoy. "Maybe learn the fucking consequences, Malfoy?"

"What did you do?" Malfoy shrieks, blonde hair flicking in front of his face as his blue eyes glare at Harry. He holds his hand out. The red burn of the raven is livid against his palm. "You've marked me!"

"Well, that's ironic," Harry snorts. Kreacher cackles and disappears, no doubt to hunt down some kind of swan for supper. That's good. Harry's getting hungry. "You're welcome."

"Come, Draco!" Narcissa says more urgently.

"No! No, someone explain this to me!" Malfoy yells, scrambling across the floor to scoop up his wand. He holds it up against all of them but his eyes fix on Harry breathlessly. Harry sees a familiar gleam in those blue eyes and knows exactly what's coming before the words even leave Malfoy's mouth. "I will tell my father everything and he will tell the Dark Lord what you have done to me! I am his loyal servant! He will learn *everything!* "

"Draco!" Narcissa barks, throwing a worried look at Harry, but Harry doesn't have the will or kindness to stop himself. The Black magic protests inside him, wild and thirsty for loyalty owed to it, and there is a liquid fury, bright and furious when Harry thinks of Draco *fucking* Malfoy telling tales to Tom. Harry has people to protect, people in this room. *Narcissa. Magnus. Severus.* Beyond that, he has even more important people to protect. *Theo.* Maybe he apparates, maybe he flies but in a second Harry's hand is pushing Draco up against the wall with a surge of Black magic. It is white and twisted like talons and Draco is gasping, held in place, struggling to breathe whilst Narcissa shifts behind Harry. He can feel her anxiety but he does not care.

"Stay where you are, daughter of Black," he snaps over his shoulder and feels Narcissa stiffen. He turns back to Draco, whose blue eyes have widened in fear.

"Potter -," he croaks.

"I'm not Potter," Harry snarls. "I'm your fucking Lord. I'm sheltering you. You can race back to Tom if you want but he'll only string you up when he realises you can tell him nothing because you can't, can you?" There is a pulse of something that ripples through Harry, sharp and metallic on his tongue, like blood. *Maybe this is what a compulsion tastes like.* He's had hints of it before, he realises, but this is delicious.

It is quite intoxicating, isn't it, little weapon?

Harry doesn't care what Tom feels. He doesn't care about anything but this. He pulls up a surge of the not-caring to drown Tom's voice, covering him in icy coldness and that only makes the ravenous taste on his tongue stronger. He doesn't think anything has ever tasted this good. *I could do this forever.* He stares Draco dead in the eye and doesn't care that he sees so much fear in those blue eyes.

"This is a Sanctuary clause. I've initiated a Sanctuary clause, that's what happened. Those are the only words you can have. You can't say anything about what has happened here. To anyone. Ever. Even if he tears your bones out of you, you'll never say it. Will you?"

Draco whimpers and struggles but doesn't break his gaze.

"No," his bottom lip trembles. "I won't."

Harry feels it then, Draco's magic struggling against him just like the pixie's had done at first. With a punch of dislike, Harry realises that Draco's magic smells and tastes like his father's, with none of the snowy freshness of Narcissa's magic and none of the strength of either of his parents. It is a cloying sweetness that makes Harry think of pot pourri and it is weak, much too weak, to resist the compulsion of Harry's magic. It is swallowed completely by Harry and he almost laughs with it. The compulsion is a wave that surges through him, pleasure and control and so much god-damn power. *This magic tastes right.*

"You can't," Harry grins. "Can you?"

"No," Draco whines, becoming floppy in the grip of the Black magic with defeat. "I can't."

"My Lord. Harry." Harry distantly feels a soft hand on his shoulder. A warm presence. The smell of Frankincense. Then suddenly, there is a sharp pinch behind his knee. He looks down. Kreacher is there, staring up at Harry with an unreadable expression. Harry doesn't know when he came back, or why. Harry can't stop himself from feeding parseltongue through Kreacher's touch.

"*Where's your bird?*" He hisses.

"Master needed Kreacher. Kreacher came. Master has much to learn," Kreacher mutters and glares up at Draco who is still clenched in the talons of the Black magic. "Heir Malfoy too."

"Harry," Harry glances over his shoulder. Magnus' gold eyes are very bright. "The Malfoy heir understands. Release him and they shall go home."

Magnus' hand is extended through a shield, covering him and Narcissa. *Why?* Then Harry sees Narcissa's cautious eyes and the way her hand with her black ring on is glowing brightly and trembling. He sees the tears in her eyes, the wet streaks of them down her face and he realises:

It's because of me. I've compelled everyone in the room. Magnus is protecting her.

Harry's eyes wildly cast around the basement. *Oh shit, Severus.* He remembers Severus' words when he tried to compel him to tell the truth: *Why would you do this?* He remembers Severus' distaste the first time he accidentally compelled the pixie after Yule last year: *Compulsions are very illegal and morally reprehensible to cast on another living thing.* Harry steps back from Malfoy, the delicious taste on his tongue becoming ashy and rancid. He catches Narcissa's eye and sees the pity there. The Black magic recedes to a swirl of snow around him and Harry clenches his left hand into a fist, not caring how much it hurts.

"Go," he says hoarsely. "Now."

Narcissa nods and reaches around Harry to grab Malfoy, and with a tap of Narcissa's wand, they are gone. Harry lets out a stuttering breath, sways on the spot and sees darkness behind his eyes. He swears that he can hear Tom's laugh.

We are fruit fallen from the same tree.

"Severus," he croaks out, forcing his eyes open. He sees Severus unfold out of the shadows, standing very close. Harry wonders when he stopped feeling the tethers so tight around his wrist, telling him Severus was close. *The compulsion. It changed everything about me.* Severus' eyes are dark, unreadable. Harry imagines he can feel his Sire's disappointment like a stone in his stomach. "Did I ... did I ...?"

Did I compel you, too?

"Yes," Severus says shortly. "Fortunately, I have my own methods of protection."

Harry sags in relief and finds Kreacher holding him up, a strong wiry fist gripping his. He tries to flick the band on his wrist but the magic inside him is too powerful. The band burns away to dust. He stumbles to the floor, pressing his back into the wall and face into his hands. Kreacher sits beside him, one hand gripping Harry's elbow. The Black magic swirls like snow around them. *I compelled Draco Malfoy to keep a secret even if he was tortured and it worked.*

"Fuck," Harry hisses, " *Shit, shit, shit, shit -*,"

"Harrison," Severus' voice is above him, outside the swirl of magic. "Stop scratching."

Harry knows why. He knows it must be hurting, digging his nails fiercely into his forehead, wishing he could gouge out his scar, gouge out Tom, but he doesn't care. *I'm like Tom, I'm worse than Tom, I liked it, I wanted to keep doing it, it felt right -*

"I'll fetch Remus," he hears Magnus' footsteps thundering away up the stairs.

Stupid, idiot, freak, compelled your own fucking Sire, he barely wants you as it is, do you think he's going to want a dark Lord in fucking waiting?

"Master must not get too cold," Kreacher's voice is a quiet croak. "Master is a fearsome Lord. Master has nothing to be ashamed of."

Harry knows it's not true. The magic swirls fiercer around Harry and Kreacher, becoming crystallized shards of ice. Harry imagines what they would all feel like, plunging into his body, letting his blood cover the floor of the basement. Maybe it would be enough to satisfy the Mage cage, maybe it would be enough to get the taste of compulsion out of his mouth. It's not sweet anymore, it's not delicious, now it just tastes like Draco's magic. *Like Lucius Malfoy.* How long will he taste like Malfoy? This horrid, cloying taste he can't get rid of? Is this the price for this kind of magic? All around him, he feels the ice crystals tremble musically. He hears Kreacher's sharp intake of breath.

"Harry?" There is a rattle on the staircase and Harry hears Remus' mumbled curses in Welsh and English. "Harry, cub, look at me."

Harry looks up and blinks blood out of his eyelashes. Magnus is holding out a hand, blue light pressing against the white light of Harry's Black magic. Harry realises Magnus is holding the crystals in place. Ice crystals all around him that have sharp tips like knives pointed directly at him and Kreacher. Severus is crouched low, to Harry's left, and Harry realises he is holding tight onto the tether between them. Ready to either fling himself in front of the icicles or to pull Harry out of them. Then there's Remus, kneeling in front of Harry with his wand out, eyes full of amber fire.

"Turn the pain into something, Harry, remember?" Remus says softly. He raises his wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Harry realises that he's never seen Remus' Patronus take corporeal form. It's a wolf, a normal wolf, silver and shimmery and young and playful. Harry doesn't need to ask what Remus' most treasured memories are that make his Patronus. He imagines Padfoot and Prongs and even Wormtail, running in the night together. Acceptance. Love. Freedom. Harry takes a shuddering breath. He presses the button on his wand holster and lifts his old wand that still just feels like a stick. He closes his eyes for a moment, and briefly, just briefly, wonders what spell he would need to cast to overpower Magnus' hold on the crystal knives. To have them pierce him completely. He remembers how it felt the first time he was put under the cruciatus curse by Tom: *Let it be over, let it be done. Let him kill me because death can't be worse than this pain.* He hears the crystal knives whine, ice screeching against magic, and Kreacher hisses softly.

"Little Mage," Magnus' voice is soft, like velvet. "Please don't. There are things worth living a long time for, remember?"

Harry doesn't remember. Because what's worth living like this for? *If I become a monster, Theo won't want me. Nobody will. I'll be a freak again, all the time.*

"Useless," Harry mumbles, scratching his scar. "Fucking useless, fucking freak, fucking despicable ugly *nasty* -,"

"*Farzandam*," Severus' voice is urgent. Harry looks at him. The icicles are vibrating and Magnus is frowning. Severus stares into Harry's eyes and he feels a memory drop into his mind. *It is the night Harry cut himself for the first time. Severus is asking him if he will allow Severus and Remus to protect him. Harry's response: I'll try.* Severus' eyes are dark and full of the emptiness of the nothing place. They are as fierce as his words. "Try. Just breathe, and *try*."

Harry breathes in. Breathes out. Closes his eyes. *What do I treasure?* Hermione's scent. Ron's voice. Theo's eyes. His Mum's voice, a whisper of the past. *You are so loved, Harry.*

"*Expecto Patronum*," he breathes.

Prongs erupts. The icicles of magic become rain, falling on Prongs' wings. The stag is too big for the basement and Remus and Magnus step back, Remus' Patronus fading away. Severus stays where he is.

"Master's beast is much bigger than before," Kreacher mutters, pressed against Harry's side, his little eyes roving over Prongs' many tined antlers. Prongs' gold eyes find Harry's. They are full of sweetness and fierceness and Harry feels a stinging blur build up behind his eyelids. Prongs lowers his face towards Harry's, his nose gold and iridescent, and Harry feels the stag's warm breath on his face, then a hot, raspy tongue against his bloody forehead. Harry sighs.

"Come on, Prongs," he mumbles, digging his fingers into the warm, rough fur of Prong's neck. "Sit down. You're fucking massive."

"Language," Severus whispers and Harry snorts. Prongs huffs and bends his many legs. Today there are only four, though Harry was sure that when he called Prongs after the veil he had more. His face had also been bonier then, like a thestral, and now is it soft and furry again. Harry's glad. His hooves scrape against the stone floor as he lies down in front of Harry. He snorts and lays his great head on the floor, gold eyes resting on Harry's face. Harry sighs and leans forward, pressing his face into the fur of Prong's back. He smells like comforting but ancient things, like the scent of the wind from the ocean in the windswept land where Theo's heir ring comes from. Harry breathes deeply, enjoying the bristly rub of Prongs fur against his lips. He turns his head, cheek still pressed against the warm animal, hearing the swooping whoosh of magic inside it, like a heartbeat, and looks at Severus.

"You were right," Harry whispers. "Patronuses help."

"I imagine when they are able to take the form of an overgrown assistance animal, then they certainly do," Severus says wryly. He sits down with his back against the wall near Harry, but despite his relaxed posture, Harry sees the way his eyes never leave Prongs. On the other side of Prongs, Remus is sitting on the floor too, looking at Prongs like he wants to touch him, quite desperately. Magnus is standing, smiling at Harry.

"So this is the famous Prongs?" Magnus asks.

"Harry's Dad had an animagus form that was a stag," Lupin says hoarsely. "We called him Prongs."

Prongs huffs and glares at Lupin for a moment. Lupin gives the beast a tight smile.

"Admittedly, James' Prongs looked like a normal stag, not ... this." Lupin gestures to Prongs' ridiculous antlers and his shadowy wings, which are still wisps of magic. When Harry runs his fingers along them, it's like touching something in a dream. He feels a hint of leather and silk.

"He is still changing," Magnus says, watching Harry's fingers tangle in the fur. "Are you the only one who can touch him like this?"

"Dunno," Harry says, pressing his face into Prongs' fur again and feeling the great beast sigh with contentment. Harry's never imagined what it would be like to be so close to something so majestic, to touch it and embrace it without fear, but it's wildly comforting.

"Mr Nott," Severus says quietly. "Though I think it is different. The Patronus is not as ... tangible under Mr Nott's touch."

"It would be interesting to see if someone, as bonded as Theo, can touch it," Magnus says thoughtfully.

"It's a fidelity bond, who is as bonded as that?" Remus mutters, looking like he wishes he was. Harry feels a twinge of sadness for Remus but also knows he can't help him. Prongs isn't James. Harry can't make that happen.

"Kreacher is," Kreacher pipes up with a croaking voice.

"House elf bonds are not equivalent to fidelity bonds," Severus says.

"Nothing is," Remus says.

"Stupid bat and stupid wolf, Kreacher is not an imbecile," Kreacher mutters and Harry smirks into Prongs' fur. "Kreacher knows more of bonds than foolish Wixen ever could. Master's fidelity bond is first. Kreacher's bond is second."

"A house elf bond wouldn't take precedence over Harry's fealty bond with Narcissa, or even the guardsmen bond with the Weasley's," Remus frowns at Kreacher. Then Harry remembers when he dived inside Kreacher's mind in the cellar. The two, twisting bonds of light and magic. He glances at Kreacher.

"Go on then," he prompts.

Kreacher rolls his bulbous eyes and then tentatively extends a hand and pokes Prongs' side. Prongs huffs and twists his face to glare at the elf.

"Second," Kreacher says victoriously, glaring at Remus.

"What in the *fuck*," Remus whispers.

"Do not encourage the child with your cursing," Severus snaps.

"Well, well," Magnus smiles, folding his arms and looking down at Kreacher in amusement. "Elf Black, how you amaze us."

"He can touch it, it's more tangible and responsive for him," Remus says, eyes fixed on Prongs. "It isn't for Theodore, not the same way, but Theodore can command it, can Kreacher?"

Harry shrugs and raises his eyebrows at Kreacher.

"Move, horse," Kreacher snarls, poking Prongs in the side. Prongs just snorts at him.

"Apparently not," Magnus says.

"So it has a tangibility with the house elf bond that it doesn't have to the same extent with a fidelity bond, but the fidelity bond can command, there is a magical intimacy there that is remarkable but justified, it's what would be expected from a bond of that nature," Remus says, the beginning of academic babblings creeping into his speech. "But the house elf bond should never involve this kind of intimacy, this kind of servitude -,"

"What did you do?" Severus asks Harry, his black eyes daring him to lie.

"Nothing," Harry sighs. "I just ... we have a different bond. We have a house elf and Master bond but we also have a ... what is it, Kreacher?"

"Master is Master but Master is also Liege," Kreacher says, not looking up from where he has taken to polishing Prongs' antlers with a tea towel.

"Liege?" Remus splutters.

"Holy Hades," Severus pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Excellent move, elf Black," Magnus grins at Kreacher. "Well done."

"Kreacher knows," Kreacher sniffs imperiously.

"Servants haven't been Liege bonded in Britain since the end of feudal lordships, and even then they were only bonded Wixen to wixen," Remus turns to Magnus. "It's ... well, I'm pretty sure it's illegal to Liege bond a creature to a Lord, right? Because it gives them limited access to the Lords power?"

"Jesus, say no, please," Harry moans. "I can't take more stuff I do being illegal."

"Then perhaps refrain from doing magic that breaks the law," Severus says curtly.

"That would mean more if I actually knew what was illegal!" Harry snaps back.

Severus looks up at him sharply and Remus stares at him. There is a moment of inexplicable silence.

"Name a law," Severus says sharply. "Any law in the Wixen world."

"Um ..." Harry brushes his nose against Prongs' fur. "Don't kill people?"

"That's it?" Severus raises an eyebrow.

"No," Harry says mulishly. "What about no compulsions? Or blood magic? Or Necromancy? No magic for underage wixen outside of school? I know stuff."

"Name a law you have not learned by the act of breaking it," Severus says sharply.

"Oh." Harry thinks hard. The longer he thinks, the more desperate Remus looks. "Oh! I've got one. No unforgiveables. Mad-Eye-Moody-Crouch taught me that one, and ... don't be a Death Eater!" Harry looks triumphantly at Severus. "Dumbledore's memories of your trials taught me that. War crimes are bad."

"Very good, Harry," Magnus smirks.

"Albus' memories of *what*?" Severus asks sharply.

"Sweet Merlin," Remus whimpers. "War crimes are bad."

"Oh come on, it's not that bad," Harry protests, tickling Prongs' ear so it flicks a gold dusting of magic over Kreacher, who sneezes. "I've probably got the basics, it can't be that different from the Muggles. Things that get you put in jail are... stealing, killing people, beating people up, blowing stuff up, not being white -,"

"All things Master is and does," Kreacher says.

"Rude," Harry flicks Kreacher's ear.

"Everything you know about magical law you've learned by breaking it," Remus closes his eyes tightly for a second. "James would be so proud."

"Of course he would, since he was himself a teenage delinquent," Severus mutters.

"Only one of you joined a terrorist cult," Remus mutters back, eyes still closed. Severus glares at him.

"Gentlemen, I think we are getting ahead of ourselves," Magnus says kindly. "Harry's right, he has the basics. We can include Wizengamot law around magic in our discussions, but most children do not learn these laws unless they are being trained for Lordship or they break them with extraordinary power."

"Most children are not Mages who twist the philosophical understanding on which those laws are built on a daily basis," Severus says tartly, looking significantly at Prongs.

"Don't listen to him," Harry mutters loudly to Prongs, rubbing a hand against Prongs' soft cheek. "You're great."

Severus rolls his eyes but those dark orbs do look distantly pleased that Harry is joking with him. There is fledgling hope inside Harry's chest. *Maybe he doesn't hate me completely now. Maybe he can forgive me for being like Tom.*

"How do you feel, Harry?" Magnus says, looking significantly at Harry's forehead. "Severus should probably look at that for you. If you are feeling well enough to let Prongs go."

Harry sighs and looks into Prongs' gold eyes. He doesn't want him to go. He presses his face against Prongs' for a moment. Loses himself in the taste of the magic of him, honey and tea and mead and ocean breezes. Allows Prongs to play a shining memory inside his mind. *Theo, rolling over in the night in Fabiola's cottage, sleepily kissing the top of Harry's head as he pulls him close, too sleepy to realise what he's done. Harry, comforted, Harry, feeling loved and wanted in the here and now for who he is, broken to pieces. Harry, sleepy and content and feeling treasured.*

"Thank you," Harry mumbles, looking up into Prongs' face. "You can go now."

Prongs nods to him and dissolves into gold mist. Harry feels an emptiness rising in him. *Alone again.* The basement is suddenly colder and Harry shivers, but Remus is shrugging off his cardigan and wrapping it over Harry's knees and Severus is tapping his shoulder with a warming charm. Harry stares at them both, crouched beside him, Severus already slipping two fingers against Harry's throat to take his pulse and Remus absentmindedly rubbing Harry's knees to warm him as they both stare at the charm over Severus' ring that shows Harry's vitals to them. *They're here. They want me. We're a unit. Maybe if I say sorry, they'll believe me.* He catches Magnus' eye over their heads and sees his friend nod encouragingly. Magnus' words from early that morning float back to him. *Say sorry. Start there.*

"I liked it," Harry blurts out. Two sets of eyes, one obsidian and one amber rest on his face. "The compulsion. It ... tasted right. That's why I ... " Harry is not quite up to saying the phrase *tried to kill myself* so he simply gestures uselessly to his blood-streaked forehead. Severus' face is blank. Harry doesn't think regret is enough to cover whatever it must be like for them, realising that the kid they are sort of parenting together is a monster, but he feels like he should say it anyway. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Harry," Remus says gently. "You're still learning. Magnus will teach you. We'll help you and ... you stopped." Remus takes a long breath, his eyes glassy. "The edges were sharp and yes, you almost hurt yourself very badly but you *stopped*. So we are ... very proud of you."

Harry nods but isn't satisfied. He knows Remus will forgive him because Remus loves him, and Remus isn't already tied to one fucking madman who loves compulsions. Harry warily looks into Severus' eyes and leaves words behind his own eyes for Severus to pull out, if he wants to. *I don't want to be a monster like him.* Severus blinks and then does something strange. He moves his hand slowly from Harry's throat and actually tucks one of Harry's wayward curls behind his ear. Harry holds his breath. It's a weirdly soft gesture for Severus who touches Harry in a very clinical, practical way that he knows Harry can handle. Not like Remus, who is full of hugs and casual affection. In a flash, Harry thinks of the half memory he has from when he sleep-apparated to the roof. *Severus' hand, warm and dry against his cheek. Waking him up. "Speak, child."*

"Your apology is accepted," Severus pulls his hand back and lifts his wand to Harry's forehead. He feels a cold breeze and knows that the blood is being cleaned away. He closes his eyes. It is only with Severus this close, concentrated on Harry's scar, that he hears the softest of whispers underneath the man's breath: "And you are not a monster, *farzandam*."

Harry sighs and something in his heart lifts. Severus has seen lots of monsters. He was bullied by James and Sirius when they were monstrous to him, he had Tobias, he's been under Tom for years and knows Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix. He even knew Petunia growing up. If Severus says he isn't a monster then Harry is going to believe him. At least for now.

— — —

Harry dreams.

He does not dream of the tasteless word beyond where he meets death. He does not dream of Merlin and Nimue and Morgana. He dreams of Tom. He dreams of the cage and he is inside with Tom again and he is in pain, again, because he is always in pain. Tom watches him and laughs because Tom always laughs.

"*You're enjoying this, aren't you?*" Harry hisses up at him from underneath Tom's wand.

"*Not as much as you, sweet weapon,*" Tom hisses back. "*You liked it, didn't you?*"

And suddenly, Draco Malfoy is in front of him, wide-eyed and terrified, and Harry is full of liquid hatred, wanting to strangle the life out of him but maybe worse, turn him into nothing more but a mind broken under Harry's will. *I could make him do anything I want him to, anything at all.*

“I feel the violence inside you, how can you not be mine?”

Pain again, sharp and horrible and it seems to be coming from deep inside him, a green buzz that fizzles through his brain like the worse cruciatus of his life along with the words: *I can always touch you now, Harry.*

“Farzandam, wake up.”

Harry jerks back into the world, his head bursting with pain, blood dripping into his eyes from his scar and that taste, that fucking horrible taste of Malfoy’s magic on his tongue.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Harry burbles, lurching forward, his t-shirt sticky with sweat, the pain in his head only equivalent to the time Voldemort possessed him at the Ministry.

“Drink this.” There is a warm hand on his forehead and a mint and ginger-scented potion under his nose. Harry opens his mouth, doesn’t care that he’s trembling so hard he can’t grip the bottle, doesn’t care that Severus’ firm hand tips it down his throat. He swallows, against the instinct of his rebellious stomach, and starts to feel a little better.

“I can taste his magic, why can I taste his magic?” Harry groans. Severus’ hand still for a moment.

“Whose magic?”

“Draco’s,” Harry moans, not awake enough or angry enough to pretend that isn’t his name now. “I can still taste it from the compulsion, why isn’t it going away?”

“Because compulsions are continuous magic,” Severus says, long hands stroking Harry’s back as he presses another potion against his lips. *Liquorice*. A pain reliever. Harry gulps it quickly. “Part of your magic will be working against his now.”

Harry is grateful for the taste of the pain reliever, drowning out the taste of Draco’s magic.

“It’ll always be like this?” Harry gasps.

“Until the Dark Lord is defeated and it can be lifted,” Severus’ voice is regretful. “Likely you will only feel it, or taste it in your case, when he is around you.”

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t do this, I didn’t want to do this -,”

“Breathe, Harrison.”

“Tom says I liked it,” Harry garbles as Severus’ pulls his fingers away from Harry’s. In the darkness, in Harry’s pain blindness, Severus is all soft presence, dry hands and smelling of herbs. It makes it easier to say the worst things. “Tom says we’re the same, that I’m just like him, that I liked controlling Draco -,”

“It was a dream,” Severus’ voice is soft. “He is not inside you. He does not have you.”

Those are comforting words but it doesn’t stop the truth.

“But I did like it,” Harry chokes out. “I liked it so much, I want to do it again but I never want to do it again -,”

“Hush,” Severus’ warm hands guide him back down onto the pillow. “Everyone likes it, *farzandam*”

“What?” Harry says, dazed. He feels Sahara’s scales dry and soft against his chin.

Listen to your Sire, Greenheart. He is wise.

“Everyone enjoys compulsions, Harrison, that is why they are so dangerous. They are akin to muggle recreational drugs.” Harry is sure he feels a dry hand brushing damp curls away from his forehead. “Everyone likes the taste of power.”

“It felt ... right at the time,” Harry mumbles, swallowing down his queasiness with a sigh. “If it’s so bad, why did it feel right?”

“Because you are a Prince. We guard by whatever means necessary and that is what you did,” Severus’ voice is a dry whisper. “And because you are a being of immense power. It tastes right to you.”

“But it was wrong,” Harry whispers drowsily.

“It was wrong to do,” Severus says quietly, “but it was not wrong to feel what you felt.”

Harry is not sure if he’s dreaming it but he imagines he feels a dry kiss against his head.

“Sleep, *farzandam*. ”

Harry does.

— — —

“Daphne says you refuse to leave the library.”

Theo looks up from his book. Blaise is standing in the doorway and is literally the last person on earth Theo wants to see right now. When Blaise dumped him unceremoniously back in the Greengrass House yesterday afternoon and then returned with Daphne too, Theo had been too infuriated to even look at him or her or anyone. He marched straight to the library and started to work and has not stopped. He glances at the clock and sees that it is coming on for seven. On Sunday. He looks down at his journal but Harry has not written a word since this morning. No explanations of where he has gone or what happened with Dumbledore. Nothing. Theo feels a swell of annoyance and scowls down at his notes.

“Why are you here?” He says. He does not care that his tone is sharp.

“Daphne invited me for Sunday night dinner,” Blaise lopez into the room, hands stuffed into dark trousers. He’s wearing a casual blue shirt and long, crimson robes and looks impeccable. Theo

hates that. He knows he must stink for want of a shower but does not give a damn. "She's worried about you."

"I'm fine," Theo mutters. He turns a page of *Dark Lords of the Southern Continent* and scans it for certain buzzwords: *Necromancy*, *bonding*, *fidelity*, anything that he thinks might denote a reference to a Mage. Anything to help him understand why Harry has changed so much.

"She says you've been in here since you came back," Blaise peers down at Theo's books and Theo resists the urge to yank them away. "Not eating or sleeping or showering, either, by the look of it."

"You mean since you sent us back," Theo says coldly.

"You are still angry at me about that?"

"What do you think?" Theo mutters.

"I don't think it matters what I think," Blaise's tone is so easy and light that it ignites Theo's anger like a tinderbox. He glares up at him.

"I think you took me away from him when he needed me, you *took* me away from him and you didn't listen to me or what I wanted you only listened to him," he hisses, flipping the page of the book.

"He's my Lord," Blaise says softly.

"I am very fucking aware of that, thank you," Theo tries not to snarl but it is very hard. He is filled to the brim with liquid fury and he *hates* that Blaise is connected to Harry in any way at all. *Harry's mine. He's fidelity bonded to me. He's mine.*

"Theodore -,"

"If he's your Lord, do you know where he is?" Theo demands. Blaise frowns.

"No." Blaise rests his hands on the back of a chair, his carnelian ring glowing. "He's not told you?"

Theo doesn't answer. He doesn't want to admit just how silent Harry has been and how meagre his reassurances that he is 'safe' feel to Theo right now.

"Do you know what he did with Dumbledore?" Theo carries on regardless. "Do you know what happened? Has Weasley told you?"

"No," Blaise says.

"Don't you find that suspicious?" Theo spits out.

"My Lord's business is my Lord's business," Blaise shrugs, "and Lords keep secrets sometimes, Harry often -,"

"Please," Theo glares up at his friend, unable to stop his voice shaking and his hands turning into fists. He knows he sounds desperate but he doesn't care. "Please do not talk to me about how you know him. Don't talk about him being your Lord. Please don't talk about the claim he has on you and you on ..."

Blaise stares at him. His fingers are still on the back of the chair and his eyes hold Theo's for the longest time. When he speaks, his voice is flat.

"You've always been ... envious."

"I am not envious I am jealous," Theo snaps. "I am jealous and rightfully so of what is *mine*."

"It's a service bond. He might have a claim on me but I make no claims on him," Blaise tilts his head, his eyes curious. "It is nothing compared to what you have."

"I know that," Theo snarls.

"Do you?" Blaise's voice is irritatingly soft. "Then how can you hate me for being his also, just in a different way?"

Theo sighs and takes a shuddering breath. It's a difficult question. How can he hate Snape for being Harry's protector and father? How can he feel such useless, furious anger towards Blaise simply because he is bonded with Harry in a way that protects nobody by Theo? How can he hate his friend so much after Blaise literally jumped in front of a wand for him?

What good is feeble emotion, Theodore, if you cannot protect those you love? Apollonius' voice sneers inside his head. Theo wonders what it is about Apollonius being dead that makes his voice all the more vivid inside Theo's mind. *For sure, he never spoke to me so much when he was alive.*

"I do not hate you," Theo whispers, letting out a slow breath. "I am ... " *Losing my mind*. "... Struggling."

"I can see that," Blaise throws himself into a chair, one hand tapping against the arm rest as his orange-brown eyes sweep over Theo in assessment. "You wish I hadn't accepted his bond? Even though it saved your life?"

"No," Theo swallows hard. The truth slips easily off his tongue. "I wish that you hadn't taken me away yesterday."

Blaise sighs and looks up at the ceiling, the evening light catching on his sharp cheekbones.

"Did you ever consider that even if he wasn't my Lord, even if he hadn't asked me, I would still have removed you, if I could?" He says slowly.

"Why?"

Blaise tilts his head and stares at Theo.

"Why do Lords rarely fight with their consorts, Theodore?"

"I don't know," Theo grunts. He doesn't know as much about European Lordship as Blaise does. His family traditions speak to something else entirely. "Norse warriors fight with their lovers."

"Oh, are you calling him that?" Blaise grins.

"Fuck you," Theo mutters. He won't talk to Blaise about his intimacy with Harry, but just the word conjures images behind his mind. Harry, topless and beautiful, underneath the Pantheon. *Oh, shut*

up and kiss me. Theo closes his eyes against the well of desperation and hunger that opens up inside him when he thinks of Harry's breathless kisses and smiles. *Then he sent me away.*

"You wish," Blaise smirks. "Lords don't fight with their consorts because it is an unsuitable risk."

"Risk to whom?"

"To those who follow them."

"Follow him," Theo corrects. "No one is following me."

"You underestimate yourself."

"I really don't," Theo mutters, turning a page of the book. He might be smart, he might be strong, he might even be exceptional for his age but Harry is mythic. Only one of them has the potential to amass a following and Theo is very glad it is not him.

"Theodore," Blaise leans forward. "You will be a *consort*. That is more than a mere marriage bond, no matter how much Daphne tells you that is the only relevant part -,"

"Over and over," Theo grunts. Daphne constantly regales him on how important it is that he not get married until he is of age. He is quite glad that she will never know about the fidelity bond because she would probably cut out his tongue.

"- it's not. A consort is a political position, not a romantic one. Even if Harry had not asked me to escort you away from Professor Dumbledore I would have done it, because what happens if Harry is compromised? Who leads us then?"

"I'm not leading anyone," Theo glares at Blaise.

"You will be," Blaise says flatly. "Harry has amassed followers -,"

"They're not followers!" Theo slams the book closed. It turns out it is too much to read about Dark Lords and hear Blaise's words about Harry at the same time.

"What else do you call sworn a host of political and personal alliances?" Blaise raises an eyebrow. "He has followers, or he will have, and if they follow him then they follow you."

"They don't even know about me."

Blaise stares at him for a long second. Theo is too tired to glare, too weary. The idea that the people who have sworn oaths to Harry would carry their devotion over to Theo is laughable and he is too exhausted to laugh. All he wants right now is Harry, to be in bed at Fabiola's Cottage, to be calm and safe and alone.

"You don't want to be his consort," Blaise says quietly.

"Excuse me?" Theo snaps. "He is the love of my fucking life, Blaise, of *course* I want to."

"No, you want to be his boyfriend but you don't want to be his political companion, you don't want to have to make the hard decision to be apart from him to ensure his power," Blaise says slowly, comprehension dawning on his face. "Tell me I'm wrong."

There was a time not long ago when he would have easily answered this question. Of course he wanted Harry to be a Lord. Last year, all he wanted was for Harry to show the world how powerful he was, to revel in it as his side, to sneer down on those who sought to oppress them and say: "Look, here we are, the children you forgot and ignored, here we are, with all the power when we had none!" But all of that was before Harry went through the veil and Theo felt the abyss of pain open up inside of him. Before Apollonius' words: *"Our bonds do not disappear in death, Theodore! They become our mourning, our grief, our burden!"* Theo cannot bear it if the fidelity bond becomes his mourning. No power is worth it. Nothing is worth it. Theo looks down at his hands. He doesn't know why they are shaking. *Safe, safe, all I want is for us to be safe and together, who decided that was too much to fucking ask?*

"Harry doesn't want those things," he says hoarsely. He can hear Harry's words from the day they sat in Hyde Park last year as clear as a bell: *I don't want to be a fucking hero, Theo.*

"Harry wants the freedom that comes from defeating Lord Gaunt," Blaise says, his voice serious. "That cannot be done without alliances and alliances are not made without incentives. People want to be assured of their safety and that doesn't come unless they think they will be protected. Protection comes from a Lord and his consort. As much as Harry must learn to grow into who he is, you must learn too."

"I know who I am," Theo says, even though he's not sure it's really true anymore, because if Harry doesn't trust him like he used to, what does that make him? Daphne's words from two weeks ago have been pushing him through - *Your father raised a warrior but you are more than that* - but yesterday has taken the surety out of him. To see Harry's closed face, to hear his resigned despairing voice inside the bond - *that's why I'm doing it* - was too much. The idea that their bond is the reason Harry sent him away hurts. It hurts Theo's chest, all the time, like the pain of broken ribs.

"No you don't, not if you're still angry at me," Blaise says flatly. "Consorts understand the need for their shields because they know that if their Lord fails, they're who everyone will rally around. If Harry perishes in the fight against Lord Gaunt, that will be you."

"He can't perish!" Theo slams his hand down on the table, the books quaking and the glass of water Daphne left promptly spilling over a book. "He can't! I will not let it happen! I will die first!"

Theo swears and pulls out his wand, uttering a vanishing spell. Blaise doesn't react, simply stares.

"This is ... something else," Blaise gives him a searching look. "What is this?"

Theo tautly says nothing. He remembers the night he did it, when Harry told him that when Harry was dead, Theo would be free of the bond. Over Yule last year, back when Harry thought the bond wasn't reciprocal. Theo remembers the taste of Harry's skin pressed against his lips in the utter darkness, the magic flowing through his heir ring. *Með odin ek svaraði: By Odin, I swear.*

"Tell me, Theodore," Blaise commands softly. Theo doesn't know if it's because he hasn't eaten anything since his half gelato yesterday or because he hasn't slept more than a snatched few hours between midnight and three, but he finds himself telling Blaise the truth.

"I ... " Theo sighs and unclenches his fists. "I took a vow."

Blaise is very still for a moment. Theo wonders, idly, if he learned such stillness from the Contessa.

“What kind of vow?”

“It was before, long before ... all of this,” Theo stares down at the desk. *But not so long ago that I didn't know the risk.* “I swore that he wouldn't perish at the Dark Lord's wand.”

Blaise is silent for a long second. His red eyes are fixed on Theo's face.

“On what did you swear?”

“It's ... a warrior's vow, I swore it to Odin -,”

“On what did you swear?” Blaise repeats.

“My magic,” Theo finds he cannot say this and look into the face of the friend who nearly lost his life protecting him. Blaise, who still limps slightly because the bones in his ankle have not fully healed from Umbridge's spell, the spell he took for Theo. “My life.”

Blaise flops back in his chair, pressing his hand to his face. It is such an unexpected gesture that for a moment, Theo doesn't know what to say. He feels it then, the weight of his own despair. *Will either of us survive this?* He thinks bleakly. *Will any of us?*

“*Santa Diana*, Theodore,” he murmured. “Does Harry know?”

Theo shakes his head, unable to speak. Blaise nods firmly.

“Good,” he says. “We will not tell him. Ever.”

“I don't understand,” Theo whispers hoarsely.

“If he knows, he won't fight,” Blaise says, eyes shining with purpose. “He has to fight.”

“I know he does, which is why I have to fight beside him,” Theo hisses, leaning forward towards his friend. “I have to keep him alive, Blaise.”

“Can you not trust everyone else who also defends him to keep him alive?” Blaise says sharply. “The Goblin King? Professor Snape? Even Professor Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix to an extent -,”

“I would not trust that rabble as far as I could curse them,” Theo snarks.

“Would you trust me? Would you trust Daphne and Granger and Weasley and the Contessa and Ambassador Lupin and Magnus Bane?” Blaise presses. “Do you trust anyone besides you to defend Harry?”

Theo swallows and looks down, because of course he does not. *How can I trust any of them when they left him to die with those fucking muggles last year?*

“I am a warrior,” he says.

“He doesn't need a warrior,” Blaise leans forward, tone severe. “He needs a fucking consort. He needs someone who is going to help him lead, help him bear the burdens of all of this before it ...”

“Before it what?” Theo's head snaps up, his stomach churning. “What do you know?”

Blaise sighs heavily. They hold one another's gaze for an extended, silent moment.

"I thought you didn't want to talk about this," he says quietly.

"About what?"

"About the fact that Harry and I are ... friends," Blaise says cautiously. "That I know him now."

Theo tries not to wince. He tries not to hate it, but he does. He hates that Blaise has seen more of Harry since they parted in Ireland than Theo has. It is not rational but he feels as if he is drowning in it. Still, he takes a deep breath because if Blaise knows something then Theo absolutely must know it too.

"You ... noticed things about him," Theo says slowly, trying to restrain his anger. "Yesterday. I saw it. You ... helped him calm down."

"We've been living together for the past two weeks," Blaise smiles wryly. "I know how his magic often follows his emotions. It's definitely made life interesting. The windows in his bedroom have needed replacing *six* times. The local glazier has been having a field day."

Theo stares at Blaise. Something so surprising occurs to him that it literally chases the anger away. He can't believe it, but all signs point to it being true.

"That's why you're here for dinner," Theo says slowly. "You miss his company."

Blaise shrugs with a smile but doesn't deny it.

"He is ... always himself," Blaise leans back easily, crossing his legs. "In the political world I live in, it's refreshing. Yes, I am disappointed he is not coming to Venice. Besides, my keeping skills have become excellent. I will miss the practice."

"Quidditch?"

"Football."

"Fucking sports," Theo mutters, tracing his fingers over the page of his journal. His last interaction with Harry was early this morning, when neither of them could sleep. He rubs his thumb over the last word Harry said: *Always*. He knows it is enough, that it has to be enough, but something inside Theo is left open, raw and weeping, desperate for more.

"He's struggling too," Blaise says plainly.

"What?" Theo looks up at Blaise.

"You asked me what I know," Blaise says. "I know he's struggling too."

Theo reaches for his necklace and runs it along the chain. He knows this, he's known it since Harry came back through the veil. *How long is he going to keep the secret of that from me?*

"Tell me," Theo sighs heavily.

"He doesn't sleep properly. He frequently spends nights in his godfather's room which helps, I think, but not enough. He doesn't eat well," Blaise gives Theo a significant look, as if to imply that

neither does Theo but Theo just glares back at him. “He struggles with outbursts of anger or frustration. He grieves. He misses you furiously. He needs a consort.”

Theo sighs and presses the fleur-de-lis against his lips. All of those things are things Theo would expect. All of them are things he knows are happening. So why does it feel so much like he is being kept in the dark? *He misses me furiously. If that's true, why do I feel like he's hiding from me?* Maybe he's spent too long with the books, but his thoughts are like words scattered on a page. He can barely catch them.

“How can I be anything to him if he shuts me out?” He mutters, running a hand over his face.

“You need to be a consort, Theodore.”

“I told you, he's shutting me out!” Theo snarls. “As you have seen, I cannot force him to do anything!”

“Not for his benefit, for your own,” Blaise says sharply. “ *You* need to be a consort.”

“What does that mean?” Theo stares at his friend.

“It means you have been too long alone,” Blaise says simply. “Being a consort, a true consort, will teach you not to be.”

Theo swallows. *The last of the Notts. The only son of Apollonius Nott, the best friend of the Dark Lord who fell and rose again. A child without family or favour. Who chooses that son?*

“It is not my fault I have been alone,” he croaks out.

“I didn't say it was, your father's choices are not yours,” Blaise leans close again, eyes becoming redder by the moment. “But to push your shield away, to resent me for protecting you, to resent Granger and Weasley and others who protect Harry, to wish Harry was only protected by you and you alone, those are your choices.”

“I don't ...” Theo closes his eyes. On Blaise's tongue, it all sounds so unreasonable. *What is so wrong about needing him to live?* “All I want is for him to be safe.”

“You lie,” Blaise shrugs.

“Do not.” Theo opens one eye and glares at Blaise, who is unmoved.

“If all you wanted was for him to be safe you would be happy that he proclaims he is safe now, but you are not,” Blaise shrugs again, tilting his head to one side like a bird. “You don't want him to be safe. You want to keep him safe *yourself*.”

“So what if I do?” Theo snaps. “He is my ... my”

Heart, soul, everything. My fidelity, my life, my beloved.

“Boyfriend? Consort? Lover?” Blaise grins. “If you could both pick one and have done, that would be helpful.”

“He is mine,” Theo finishes lamely. Blaise sighs and stares out of the window at the setting sun over Grosvenor Square. Outside, a nightingale sings.

“I belong to none on this earth as I do my family,” Blaise says quietly. “I am of the Donas de Fuera. They treasure us, they treasure the Contessa so fiercely and they treasure me also, yet they do not keep us on the island. We are endangered, they love us, they would recall us to Sicily if they could but they do not.”

“I don’t ...” Theo has never, ever heard Blaise talk about his clan before. The Donas de Fuera are shrouded in mystery and Theo cannot help the scholar inside of him that awakes with interest at his words. It’s distracting, at least. “What do you mean?”

“They trust the Contessa. They trust me. They trust that I have been trained in our ways and I will guard her and that she has been raised to lead and she will lead me. They trust us to care and protect one another and they send their own protection from afar. Sometimes, you have to be apart,” Blaise’s face is suddenly pained as Theo thinks he has never seen it, not even when Blaise was dying from Umbridge’s curse. “She goes to war without me. I hate it. But I know that I am the future of our family. We fight apart so we can face the future together, that is the way of our people. We always protect the future. When Harry asked me to send you away ...”

“It’s not the same,” Theo’s throat is tight. He sees the parallels Blaise has drawn but he can’t transfer them into his own mind. *We are not the same.* “Harry and I ... have one another. Not a whole island.”

“When you chose him, you chose him because he was different, right?” Blaise’s eyes are sharp. “He was a different path from what Apollonius offered?”

Theo nods, wordlessly. He remembers seeing Harry in the apothecary, the boy who thwarted the Dark Lord *again*, just casually sparking magic to a deadly boomslang. He remembers how he looked like danger. Danger and possibility.

“Then be different,” Blaise says emphatically as he leans forward again. “Apollonius raised you to be a lone soldier, to trust only yourself and your own weapons. Be different. Trust us. Trust Harry’s people. Help him to trust others since he’s nearly as shit at it as you are.”

“That’s offensive,” Theo chokes.

“And true,” Blaise nods firmly. “Saints above, the two of you are so untrusting you’d happily fucking hole up in a cottage somewhere and never see anyone ever again.”

“And what’s so wrong with that?” Theo asks without thinking because that partly sounds like a perfect future to him.

“Because you are *hunted*,” Blaise’s eyes glow ominously and Theo feels a horrible thrill of desolation inside him. The truth is a weighty blow and inside, he staggers. “You tell me, Theodore, what happens to prey when it retreats to a hole?”

Theo thinks of hunting with Apollonius. *Just wait, Theodore, wait for it to retreat and hide. What it thinks is safety is no more than a coffin.*

“You’ve made your point,” Theo whispers, wishing he had not knocked over the water glass. His throat is so dry.

“I don’t think I have,” Blaise looks at him with such ferocity that Theo remembers why he is called the future of magical Europe. “If you don’t stop trying to defend him on your own, if you don’t

start believing in the people around him, we will lose.”

“And that’s all that matters?” Theo says sharply. *All that matters to me is that Harry lives.*

“You’ll die,” Blaise says flatly. “I don’t want that.”

“I don’t want that either,” Theo says automatically but Blaise snorts and shakes his head.

“I don’t believe you,” Blaise stares at him, eyes narrowed. “I don’t think you care about your own life at all. I think you only care about Harry’s.”

Blaise is so acute in his observation that Theo can’t help but wince. Blaise notices, triumph in his eyes.

“He is my life,” Theo whispers, even though it feels like a frail defence.

“He is not,” Blaise is terse. “You were my friend first, you were my lover first, we belonged to one another once and we still do, if our friendship survives your attempts to ruin it -,”

“My attempts? I’m not the one who made a vow!” Theo yells, unable to stop himself when Blaise is trying to remind him of the past. *What does the past matter now, when Harry is gone from me and the bond is like a stone in my fucking chest?*

“To keep you alive,” Blaise’s voice, rather than rising like Theo’s, is lowering to a dangerous tone. “Why else do you think I’m in this fucking thing, Theodore?”

“Politics,” Theo snaps.

“No, that is why the Contessa is in it,” Blaise shakes his head. “I’m here for you. So is Daphne.”

“You lie, you are both here for yourselves,” Theo mutters and he knows it is partly true, because they both fucking told him, didn’t they? Blaise for his mother, Daphne for her sister, why can’t Theo be in it for Harry? Blaise simply stares at him for a long time, then sits back in his chair gently, his hands gripping the arms of it so tightly that Theo imagines he sees Blaise’s ring glowing softly.

“You started to court him and I kept your secret. I did it because you are my friend first, everything else came later,” Blaise says gently. Theo flinches at the softness. He does not want softness. Wildly, he wishes Apollonius back because at least then, he would not have to endure tenderness. The only tenderness he wants is Harry and he cannot bear it from anyone else. “It pains me to see you diminish this way.”

Theo stares. Blaise’s tone is tight with discomfort, his eyes nearly as red as blood. Theo had expected to start a fight. He had not expected this, this broken sadness in his friend’s tone and this impossible declaration.

“I am not diminished,” Theo says, all anger drained out of him.

“You are diminishing yourself,” Blaise’s voice is still the same, sad tone. “Your life has value outside of your relationship to Harry, you are a worthy consort because *you are worthy*, Theodore. He does not make you so. You have spent too long thinking that being the son of Apollonius made you nothing that you now think being with Harry is the only thing that makes you something.”

The words are crushing. They are weapons that spear him through the chest and for a second, Theo is utterly breathless. He remembers Blaise's words when he first found out about Harry, down in the Slytherin dormitory. *"Whatever Potter has done to turn you from your father's path ... I am grateful for it. So I am also grateful to him. I will keep his secrets if he asks me."*

"Blaise, I don't ... I can't ..."

Theo sighs and flops forward, letting his head rest against his book on Dark Lords. He feels so exhausted by it all, exhausted with worry, exhausted with anger, exhausted with fear, it is as if his bones are too heavy to hold him up. Gently, he feels a hand stroking his head. It is a light touch, not like Harry's touch which is all tugs and grabs and makes Theo feel like he is real in a beautiful way, but it is comforting. He remembers, suddenly, that after he and Blaise first took one another's virginity in their fourth year, Blaise had stroked his hair just like this and they had spoken about their Transfiguration homework. It might not have been heart-bonding and even though Theo knew he was not in love with Blaise and that Blaise was already falling deeply in love with Daphne, he remembers how lucky he felt then, to have such a friend. Someone he could trust with this vulnerability. Theo sighs heavily. He does not think there are the right words in the English language for how he feels so he settles on some rough Italian.

"Mi dispiace," he whispers. Blaise doesn't answer but his fingers continue to softly stroke the top of Theo's head. Theo swallows hard. He knows he can offer no explanation but he feels like he must speak, that the words are like iron on his tongue. He turns his face to the side, cheek pressed against the fabric binding of the book.

"He ... he was the first ..." Theo closes his eyes tightly for a second, remembering how Harry's trust was so relatively easily learned. Remembers how Harry scrambled, desperately, to keep Sahara from biting him in the Scout hut: *don't die like this Theo, don't die because I'm an idiot.* "He saw me differently."

Not as a Death Eater's son. As myself.

"Yes," Blaise's voice is soft. "But the difference was not in how *he* saw you. His eyes do not make that version of you reality. It has always been real."

Theo feels a sharpness behind his eyes and takes a stuttering breath.

"Yeah?" He whispers.

"Yes." There is a shuffling sound and when Theo opens his eyes he is looking directly into Blaise's, who has laid his head down on the book beside Theo and whose red eyes are fixed upon his. "Apollonius took a lot away from you. Don't let your true identity be one of them."

Theo stares at his friend. He remembers Blaise's words at the end of their first-ever discussion about Harry. *We are friends. You have chosen a side. I will ensure you win.* Theo is not sure what he believes right now, his world feels as if it has been on a nauseating tilt ever since Harry went through the veil and he watched the life leave Apollonius' body, but he believes Blaise. Theo nods painfully. Blaise smirks gently and lifts his hand with the carnelian ring on it to press against Theo's hand. He watches as Blaise's yellowy-orange magic gently binds their wrists together. For the first time ever, it doesn't feel constrictive. It feels comforting. Theo lets out a long sigh.

"He's keeping secrets," Theo whispers to his friend. "From me."

Blaise sighs heavily, his breath warm on Theo's face.

"As you have to learn to be a consort he has to learn to be a Lord," Blaise murmurs. "He is afraid."

"Of what?" Theo asks, throat tight.

"I don't know," Blaise's red eyes are bleak for a moment. "I don't think anyone knows."

"I'll ... find out," Theo swallows hard. "Somehow."

"That would be helpful," Blaise whispers with a quirk of his lips. "If anyone can get Potter-Black sorted out, it's you, Nott."

Theo snorts with laughter and Blaise grins, linking his fingers with Theo's. Nothing is fixed but this is good, Theo thinks. It is good that Blaise is here and that Theo can trust him. It is something, at least.

"Thank you," Theo whispers. "Shield."

"*Non c'è problema*," Blaise whispers back, his eyes as red as fresh blood. "Consort."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Preparing for Privet Drive

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/depression/grief).

Right, so I cannot avoid this - there will be an update EVERY DAY this week because the Privet Drive chapters are TOO DAMN LONG. For those of you trying to avoid the Theo/Harry tension, wait until the weekend and then read all of this weeks updates. I think you'll enjoy it more that way.

This time, Harry prepares for Privet Drive.
Next time, It's back to number four. With friends.

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

“What are we learning today?” Harry asks, wheeling his axe in his left hand, enjoying the feeling of being able to grip a weapon, thanks to his *Anzar* rune.

“A mixture of things,” Bill says lightly, “since you go back to your relatives tomorrow. His Majesty would like you to be as prepared as possible.”

It's Monday morning and Harry slept terribly. The weight of the bond in his chest is hard to sleep with even if he wasn't waking up every two hours screaming. Remus has gone to Venice today and Severus is trying to brew something that isn't as strong as a Dreamless sleep but will hopefully help Harry ward off nightmares. Harry doesn't have high expectations. It seems like his Mage power makes dreams more persistent. *Just my fucking luck.*

“Okay,” Harry looks over at Magnus. “Are you helping?”

“I am, Harry,” Magnus nods gently. “We need to have a discussion about intention.”

“Huh?” Harry looks between them. Magnus has a lit cigarette between his lips and pulls it away with two fingers, puffing out smoke.

“I had a talk with his Majesty. Whilst he is very impressed with the way you wield your power in the world -,”

“I don't *wield* anything, that sounds weird,” Harry mutters, rubbing his scar.

“Nevertheless, his Majesty worries that you do not perform magic with much intentionality,” Bill says, moving his axe quickly and easily between two hands. “You've got a lot of raw power and now I know where it comes from it makes more sense, but you very rarely seem to use it intentionally. We're going to teach you how to do that.”

“I don’t ...” Harry looks at Magnus. “I mean, magic is just like, thinking, right? We only need a thought, right? That’s what you said.”

“I was correct, like always,” Magnus grins playfully. “But this means that sometimes, we need to be careful about our one thought.”

“I don’t get it,” Harry says blankly. Magnus smiles quietly.

“Did I ever tell you how my father died?” He says. Harry looks at Bill, who merely shrugs and continues to twirl his axe through his hands like it weighs nothing more than a baton.

“No,” Harry says. “How?”

“He got ill and perished in 1608,” Magnus says. “He was not even a hundred.”

“That’s young for a Wixen,” Bill comments.

“It’s even younger for a Mage,” Magnus says calmly. “He could have lived a thousand lifetimes, he could have been standing here, meeting you, Harry, but he isn’t. The reason he isn’t is because of will.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry says.

“When his library was harmed, he ... lost his will.” For a moment, Magnus’ golden eyes are bleak. “He did not want to live so he did not.”

Harry stares at Magnus. He knows, suddenly, what Magnus is talking about. In the cellar, yesterday, when the shards of ice made by Harry’s own magic were only stopped from stabbing him by Magnus. *My will against Magnus’ will.*

“ So ... you want me to get better at ... what I choose to do with magic?” Harry asks, but he looks into Magnus’ eyes significantly. *You want to make sure I don’t accidentally kill myself with my magic?*

“Yes,” Magnus says, smiling kindly.

“That and we need to help you develop your strengths,” Bill says. “Now that I know what your strengths are, I can help with that. Have you ever seen one of these?”

Bill pulls back a strand of ginger hair in front of his ear to reveal a gold cuff at the top of it. It’s different from the one he gave Harry, it’s got shards of diamond encrusted out of it like little stalactites.

“No,” Harry says. “It looks cool.”

“ *Anzars* wear them, though I think you won’t have to,” Bill says, letting the piece of hair fall back into place. “Has anyone explained elemental magic to you, Harry?”

“Yeah, most Wixen are bad at it, Goblins and Fae are good at it,” Harry says. “Can’t teach fish to fly.”

Magnus smirks and Bill looks confused but shakes his head, moving on.

“It’s not that Goblin, Fae, Centaurs and Elves are better at it, Harry, it’s that their magic is completely based upon it. Fae and Centaurs are connected to living matter, Fae to plant matter and Centaurs to the stars and matter in the universe. Goblins’ magic is connected to all minerals in the earth, all matter that has been crafted they can sense and feel and manipulate to their will.”

“Like Griphook, in Grimmauld Place he ripped up the floorboards around Sirius,” Harry frowns. “But in the Forum, he cast a spell which hid us from muggles and that wasn’t -,”

“Just as Wixen use the magic inside them to learn and create spells that predictably, most of their kind can replicate, Goblins do the same. But unlike Wixen, they do not have conduits to help amplify their magic, which is why they use elemental magic more frequently.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Harry scrunches his face up in confusion. “Does that mean that if Goblins had wands they would be less good at elemental magic and if Wixen didn’t have wands they would be better at it?”

“That’s a bit of a chicken and egg question,” Magnus sighs, puffing out smoke from between his lips.

“And not relevant to what we need to do today,” Bill says briskly. “Do you remember when we talked about people in my line of work, how we do a lot of magical sensing?”

“Yeah, for making wards and stuff.”

“No creature on earth can create wards as beautiful and effective as Goblins,” Magnus says. “They can sense them, they can build them out of runes and elemental magic in a way that Wixen can only dream of.”

“For that reason, Gringotts Cursebreakers use these amplifiers to help us do our jobs,” Bill gestures to his ear. “They help us ... become more attune to the magic Goblins hear naturally in the world, in the elements around them.”

“You hear magic?” Harry says eagerly, thinking of how he hears and smells and tastes magic (and sometimes sees it, with Kreacher and Theo, but Harry tries not to think about that because four out of five senses seem too much to be even remotely considered normal).

“No,” Bill shakes his head. “Much like how wixen can sense magic occasionally, like if a classroom of students has been practicing or around a particularly powerful wixen, the cuffs help us feel it. Traces in the air, a sense of heat, that sort of thing.”

“That’s like what Severus does,” Harry mutters. Bill raises his eyebrow and nods.

“Yes, for some very powerful wixen, it comes naturally, like Dumbledore and apparently, Severus.”

“And us,” Magnus grins at Harry. “Remember, what we talked about at Christmas? Listening to the sound and the smell of magic?”

“Uh huh,” Harry tosses his axe and catches it, just like Bill taught him to do.

“What’s the benefit of sensing magic, Harry?” Bill asks, catching Harry’s axe with one hand and then seamlessly flipping both his and Harry’s together. “From the perspective of an *Anzar* or a

codebreaker.”

“I mean, I guess it makes you ... better at your job? I guess it makes you stronger and ... I dunno?” Then Harry thinks of smelling Dumbledore’s magic in the Forum. “You’re talking about using magic sensing defensively and offensively, right? In fighting?”

“Exactly,” Magnus smiles proudly. “Obviously, I will be handling defensive rather than offensive.”

“Yeah, but the premise stays the same,” Bill says, giving Harry a hard look. “Magic sensing, however you Mage-types do it, can give us an advantage in a fight.”

“How?” Harry asks.

“By listening,” Magnus says simply. Bill pulls out his wand.

“I’m going to shoot spells around you,” Bill says, “simple spells that would appear in a duel.”

“Okay,” Harry shifts uncomfortably and looks at Magnus. “What do I do?”

“Listen, smell, taste,” Magnus says simply. “Close your eyes, Harry. Just tell us what you hear and smell and taste right now.”

Harry sighs and closes his eyes. He senses too much, all at once.

“Um, like, do you want me to say literally everything?”

“Yes, give us a sense of a baseline,” Bill says.

“Okay,” Harry swallows. “Just magic though, right? Not like normal sounds or -?”

“Just magic,” Magnus says.

“Right, course, that would be totally weird,” Harry mumbles. He breathes slowly, taking in the scents around him. “I can smell you and Bill -,”

“Try and be specific, Harry,” Magnus says quietly.

“Fine,” Harry huffs, feeling oddly exposed. He keeps his eyes closed and tries not to flush. “You’re ... old things. You smell like old things.”

“Very flattering,” Magnus chuckles.

“No, like ... rosewater and amber and saffron,” Harry swallows. “Bill’s magic is cinnamon and his Lordship magic is marjoram and ...” Harry smells the air of the garden. There is the smell of burnt sage and rosemary. “Severus is around, his is herbs.”

“I am,” a low voice sounds from the doorway. Harry can feel the strength in his tether. “Keep going. When Lady Macbeth arrived you heard her arrival, heard the wards but you smelled her magic.”

“Snow, yeah.” Harry sighs heavily. “I can’t hear anything right now, but - yeah, I can hear you, Magnus, is it like a shield?”

Harry recognises the song of it, the sound of a thousand melodious voices.

“Very good!” Magnus says. “Well done, Harry!”

“That’s interesting, so you potentially smell people’s own magic but hear spells,” Bill says thoughtfully. “So pay attention to what you smell or hear before and when I cast, okay?”

“Okay.” Harry tries not to sound anxious but for some reason, his mind is full of the scent of Bellatrix’s magic in the cage. *Dying flowers*. Bellatrix’s spells. *Rotting fruit with a screeching sound, like a screaming train whistle*. Harry clenches his fists. *I don’t care, I don’t care that she tried to tear me apart and took my finger, I don’t care*.

“Well, that’s a magic I’ve never sensed before,” Bill says wryly.

“Severus, if you would?” Magnus calls and suddenly, the smell of burning herbs is all Harry can smell and feels warm hands on his shoulders.

“Breathe, *farzandam*,” Severus says quietly. “You are not trapped. You are not being forced to do this or cut apart. This is simply an exercise to help you survive. What do we do, Harrison?”

“Plan and survive,” Harry croaks. “Until we can fight and win.”

“Then let us do that,” Severus removes one of his hands and Harry can feel him standing by his shoulder, even with his eyes closed. He remembers Severus’ words: *I could find you anywhere*. “Begin, Weasley, I shall remain here.”

“Right, Harry, here we go.”

Harry concentrates on the scent of Bill’s magic, tries to listen and then he hears magic. The song of Bill’s magic makes Harry think of sandstorms.

“Okay,” Harry nods. “I heard that. What was it?”

“A disarming spell,” Bill says. “Listen again.”

Harry does. The sandstorm sounds different, more ferocious.

“That was different,” Harry swallows. Bill’s magic also smells different, spicier than before.

“Yes, that was a stunner,” Bill says. “This is good.”

“How does smelling different magic help, really?” Harry says a little desperately. He can’t imagine it will help against Tom at all.

“Preparation,” Magnus says softly. “Your instincts are strong enough that you will sense when danger is coming.”

Harry can’t help it. He flinches. Inside his mind, he hears the heavy footfalls of Vernon on the staircase and remembers how he could tell from just the sound of his over-shined shoes how much pain Harry would be in that night.

“Open your eyes, Harrison,” Severus says.

Harry does. Severus is standing right in front of him, eyes focused on Harry's. It's not even really legilimency, Harry thinks, because he's left the memory right there for Severus to find.

Harry is six and inside his cupboard. He can hear Petunia slamming pans in the kitchen. He is nursing a horrible burn on his arm, rubbing it as hard as he dares because he knows that sometimes when he rubs something that hurts enough, it stops hurting. Then he hears the front door open. He hears it slam, so hard the grate on the cupboard rattles. Harry winces. He knows tonight will be horrible.

Severus' eyes are dark and full of fury, the way they are inside the nothing-place. Severus does something he doesn't often do, not unless Harry is coming out of a nightmare or something like that. He takes Harry's hand and Harry gratefully tightens the tethers between them, feeling safer when they are taut.

"Everything that you learned in that house we will take and use to ensure your survival outside of it and then, when you are ready, to ensure their downfall," Severus says quietly.

Harry thinks about the cupboard for a moment and doesn't even care that Severus can see it inside his eyes. He doesn't know what justice against the Dursleys looks like but he knows Severus and Remus definitely have some ideas and are waiting, just waiting for him to be ready. Harry suddenly wants to be ready.

"I'm ... going to be ready," Harry says quietly. "I'm ... going to try."

Severus smiles, or at least as close to smiling as Severus gets. The slight crease around the eyes in an unmoving face.

"All things in their time," he says, letting go of Harry's hand but not softening the tethers between them. Harry is grateful for that. "Now, let us learn how to survive."

— — —

My Lord,

I do not know why you have not told Theodore where you are. I have told him you are with your godfather, since this is the only thing I know for sure, but I also hear from the Contessa that Bane is back. This seems like good news. I also hear from Mr Weasley that we are making good strides with additional Bear Wands treaties. Lastly, your vow taking with Professor Dumbledore in the Pantheon did not go unnoticed. The Wixen newspapers of Rome have dubbed you Piu Grande Mago. I did warn you that followers may gather. I believe it has begun.

I would urge you to speak to your consort.

May the goddess bless your endeavours,

Heir Zabini

Blaise,

I told you not to call me that. The goblins are in charge right now, or Bill is, so we are keeping our location quiet, but we're safe. Tell your Mum that I'm sorry about the Pantheon. Piu Grande Mago sounds cooler than the Chosen One. What does it mean? By the way, Magnus told me today he knows Francesco Totti. I'm going to ask him to get me a signed football shirt. Do you want one?

Harry

My Lord,

Please reassure your consort to your safety. Piu Grande Mago means The Greatest Wizard, or ... Necromancer. How does Magnus Bane know a legendary muggle football player?

May the goddess bless your endeavours,

Heir Zabini

Blaise,

If I tell you it's because Magnus likes to flirt with muggle celebrities, will you still want a shirt?

Harry

My Lord,

If anything, I shall want one even more, knowing how it is won.

May the goddess bless your endeavours,

Heir Zabini

— — —

Lord Black and Lord Potter Apparent,

My son and heir informs me today you have expressed regret over your interaction with Professor Dumbledore in our Pantheon. You are not responsible for the actions of a man who tried to exert his power in a situation that was not his to control. I also understand you have been informed about the media interest in you. It is my advice, and I have shared it with Ambassador Lupin and Steward Black, that you remain in the United Kingdom for the summer if possible. I would like to remind you at this point of your vow to me. Do not fear power, Harry.

May the goddess bless your endeavours,

The Contessa Zabini

— — —

Harry,

I'm glad you like the clothes! Yes, Magnus can obviously have whatever he likes but make sure you keep the wonder woman t-shirt. I'm gutted we can't hang out in Rome like we planned, but me and Mum and Dad are going to have a nice holiday. Blaise has gone back to Venice or London, but it's actually been really nice for me to chat to Mum. We spoke about the gay stuff on Saturday night and she bought me this cool book about the Stonewall riots. Did you know that you're in all the Wixen newspapers here? Fred and George are going to pick me up when we go to Privet Drive. I'll meet you there. Just so you know, I'm bringing pepper spray.

Talk to Remus about the edges, please, and especially the letter from your Dad (sorry, James).

I love you loads.

Mi

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Are you okay?

Harry sits on the roof and looks down at Theo's words. Everyone's telling him to be honest with Theo, Magnus has been trying to drill it into him all day, but it feels impossible. What would he say? *'No, I tried to kill myself with ice knives yesterday and the only reason I didn't is because Magnus is stronger than I thought.'*

"Great idea," Harry hisses rolling his eyes.

"Tell your grey one the truth," Sahara hisses. She is winding her way up his arm and flicking her tongue at his journal.

"He'll leave me," Harry hisses back. Harry knows the bond can't be broken but there are different types of leaving. Like Sirius did, when he found out Harry's wasn't James son and stopped loving him the same way. *If Theo stops loving me the same way, it'll be worse than him leaving.*

"Then he would be a fool." Sahara licks Harry's hand. *"And you would still have me."*

Snakes, Harry thinks, don't really get these things. He sighs and sets his pen to the page.

Not really.

He waits for Theo's words to appear.

Do you want to talk about it?

It's actually the last thing he wants to do, but how can Harry say that? How can Harry say that what he wants most is to turn back time? *For Sirius not to be dead. For Death to not be what she is to me. For everything to be normal and to not feel like I'd be better off dead.* He sighs and sets his pen down.

I wish we could be at Fabiola's cottage together again.

It's basically the truth, isn't it? What Harry wants is that time when his world was small and lonely but at least there was Theo there with him. Now his world is massive and sprawling and he is never alone but somehow, he feels more solitary than ever. As if he's looking at the world through several mirrors and no one can quite see him or understand him anymore and he's not even sure he wants them to. *If they really see who I am, will they still want me?* He watches Theo's words form on the page.

Me too. I miss our bed.

Harry smiles down at the words.

I miss our lake.

He misses the tall reeds and the long grass and the dragonflies skimming the water.

I miss Kreacher being a dick.

Harry snorts with laughter and smiles.

I miss you brewing potions and telling me to fuck off outside so I don't ruin them.

I miss you asking me to do impossible things. Like turn scars into runes.

Harry's smile falters a little. Does Theo really miss it? Being asked to do the impossible? *Being asked to love me when I'm like this is pretty fucking impossible.*

Do you mean that?

Have you ever known me to say something to you I didn't mean?

Harry hesitates. He could tell him. He could tell him now that he's cracking up, that he's losing his shit that he's as close to the edge as he's ever fucking been but something holds him back. The memory of Theo's screams in the Department of Mysteries. The howling fear and despair when he went through the veil. He didn't recognise the voice at the time but he knows who it was now. He never wants to make Theo sound like that ever again.

Guess not.

Are you safe?

Yes.

Harry doesn't want to lie and this isn't a lie. He is safe at Spinner's End. Apart from the whole being on the roof thing. It's tomorrow that might be the problem. Harry sighs and looks down at Sahara.

"You know you can't come with me tomorrow?" Harry hisses at her. *"I don't want Vernon to find you."*

"I would bite him."

"That probably wouldn't help things," Harry hisses. *"I'd have to explain to the Ministry why my uncle is dead."*

"Explain that he was weak prey."

"Yeah, they won't go for that," Harry sighs. *"I do wish you were coming though. You and Hedwig. It'll be weird without you."*

I am always with you, Greenheart, Sahara's voice echoes in his head as she slides away over the tiles, chasing a spider.

I know, Harry thinks back. *Shall I send you to Theo while I'm away?*

I shall guard your Grey One, Greenheart.

Thanks, Harry looks up at the stars. *That would make me feel better.*

You will not feel truly complete until you have your whole heart returned to you.

Harry doesn't know what that means but he rubs his chest. His ribs hurt all the time right now. It certainly feels like he's missing half of his heart. He finds his fingers inadvertently slipping his letter from James out of the front of his journal. His fingers skim over the words: *I'm sure you have grown into a very smart man, Harry, with some excellent people around you.* Harry doesn't feel smart. Harry feels like he's doing exactly what Hermione said in Rome.

"Fucking flailing," Harry mutters.

"This thing you have for a roof, Harry, it's getting out of hand."

Harry turns to see Remus climbing out of Harry's bedroom window. He's wearing his pyjamas, or, Harry guesses, Severus' pyjamas but Harry doesn't want to think too much about that.

"Just sitting, writing in my journal, looking at the stars," Harry says immediately, since he and Remus had a long chat earlier today about self-control and self-harm impulses, even though just thinking about it makes Harry wince. *"Very far away from the edge."*

"I can see that," Remus smiles softly. *"Can I join you?"*

"Sure. How come you're still up?" Harry asks. Remus has to commute to Venice in the morning.

“You hadn’t woken up yet so we were worried,” Remus says, sliding down the tiles to sit beside Harry. “Can’t sleep?”

Harry shakes his head and pulls down the cuffs on the dark green jumper he’s wearing, one of Theo’s that he’s managed to keep hold of. It doesn’t smell like Theo at all anymore, which sucks. Harry sort of wishes he had stolen Theo’s shirt in Rome, just to be wrapped in his scent.

“What’s that?” Remus asks, looking down at the letter in his hands. Harry thinks of Hermione’s words and hesitates for a moment, before handing over the letter. Remus’ eyes are quizzical as he takes it, he hasn’t recognised the writing yet, but Harry watches as his eyes widen.

“Prongs,” Remus whispers. Harry can’t help but watch Remus’ expression in fascination as he reads. There is so much hunger, so much tearful joy as he chuckles in surprise, his fingers pressed to his mouth. When he has finished, Remus is wiping a tear from his eye and looking at Harry tremulously. “He did complain about having no clean t-shirts, all the time, but never washed anything. At one point, Lily started throwing them out. He nearly lost his mind.”

“It sounds ... fun,” Harry takes the letter back and looks at the confident, casual scrawl. He can imagine James just jotting it off, standing over a desk whilst the kettle boiled in the kitchen. *He never expected to die.* “It sounds like it would have been fun, growing up with him.”

“He had such plans for you, Harry,” Remus’ eyes are glittering with tears like shards of amber caught in water. “He loved that you liked to fly, like him, that you were a fearless little baby, always chasing Padfoot around. He always talked about taking you to your first Quidditch match, about introducing you to his favourite team -,”

“Do you know it?” Harry’s head jerks up. No one has told him this. *Why has no one ever told me?*

“The Falmouth Falcons,” Remus smiles. “That’s where Potter manor was, down in Cornwall.”

“Cornwall,” Harry repeats. He’s never been. It’s just like when Severus told him about his Mum being a brummie, he’s overwhelmed by his utter lack of connection to it all. He can’t help his fist tightening on the letter, creasing the paper.

“What is it, Harry?” Remus asks, gently prising the paper out of his hand before smoothing it and carefully sliding it into the back of his journal. “What’s upset you?”

“He didn’t say anything,” Harry can’t help his voice from shaking. “Not a *word*. He must have known, he had blood adopted me, they must have talked about it so why didn’t he just say, ‘hey, Harry, so I’m not your biological Dad and your biological Dad is a Death Eater and has no fucking idea he’s your Dad because your Mum did this insane charm on him and he doesn’t even remember sleeping with her, just in case I’m dead and you want to check that out!’ Why didn’t he just *tell* me? They didn’t leave anything, *Griphook* didn’t even know! Why didn’t they just leave a record of it somewhere for someone ...”

Harry runs out of steam. He clenches his fists and fights tears. Beside him, Remus is taking slow breaths and Harry knows it’s an invitation for him to do the same. For a moment, he follows his godfather’s breath. The sparks in his fingers lessen.

“I don’t know,” Remus says eventually. “I ... have as many questions as you do.”

“Really?” Harry scrubs his face and looks at his godfather.

“Yes,” Remus snorts slightly and shakes his head. “Merlin, I have had so many fights with James in my head about it, so many fights with Lily too.”

“What do you tell them?” Harry whispers. Remus blinks up at canis major then lets out a long, slow breath.

“That they were always optimistic to a fault, that they always saw the best in everyone and every circumstance and that they put too much faith in Albus, in Peter, in Sirius,” Remus' voice becomes shaky. “In me. That they should have been a little more afraid, a little less sure. That they should have considered the possibility of a world where all of us fell apart and no one caught you. That they should have trusted in us a little less.”

Harry watches Remus' face. The moonlight hits the scars on his face and for a brief second, he looks as if he is carved out of stone, made ancient with grief.

“What do they say back?” Harry whispers. “When you fight in your head?”

Remus smiles and, in the oddest transformation, suddenly looks young.

“James says, *‘I trust you Moony, I know you’ll do a good job,’* Lily says *‘it doesn’t matter who loves Harry as long as he’s loved and happy and safe.’*” Remus takes a heavy breath in. “They both tell me that they’re twenty-one years old and happy and in love and despite the war, they are too young and too untouched by pain and grief to truly think terrible things will happen to them.”

Harry’s stomach cramps. He has never known what that is like. Maybe that's why they feel so distant to him, these two happy people who were completely assured in their own happiness. *I'm not like that, neither is Severus or Remus.*

“They were so young,” he mutters, because it seems like the right thing to say.

“They were,” Remus' voice is broken hearted. “So I am angry with them, Harry, for your sake and mine, but I can’t blame them. They didn’t know how much everyone around them would fail them.”

“You didn’t fail them,” Harry says fiercely. “Look, I never knew them but I know, I *know* neither of them would think that.”

“If that were true, Harry, you wouldn’t have to be going back to Surrey tomorrow,” Remus says bleakly.

“Look, If they were too young to know better then so were you,” Harry says stubbornly. “It wasn’t your fault that Petunia got me, it wasn’t your fault Dumbledore didn’t - didn’t sort it out,” Remus’ eyes flash vibrantly at Dumbledore’s name. “It wasn’t their fault that they ... died.”

Harry stares down at the folded letter in the back of his book. He realises why he is angry at James. It’s not about Severus, not really. It’s because the letter is a taste, the smallest hint, of the happiness he could have had with the step-father who claimed him as his own. *I’m mad that he’s dead.*

“I really wish they hadn’t,” Harry whispers. Remus holds his hand and squeezes it.

“Me too,” Remus murmurs.

“I bet Mum wouldn’t have even visited Privet Drive,” Harry snorts. “James would fucking hate it there.”

Harry feels like he barely knows his step-father but one thing he does know is that the happy-go-lucky chaotic man who wrote that letter would think Privet Drive was pure hell.

“You don’t have to do this, Harry,” Remus says quietly. “We’ll find another way to get Magnus as your Steward. I’m not saying it would be easy but we would do it if we needed to.”

“I know,” Harry looks down at his knees. “But this is the quickest way and ... I bound Dumbledore. I can’t undo it now and this way ... I never have to go back.”

“That was part of it?” Remus leans back on his hands and stares up at the moon. It’s waxing. Harry wonders how it feels for Remus to look at the moon and remembers his boggart in third year. Harry nods.

“Yeah, after this, I’m done.” Harry searches for Canis Major in the sky. “I’m never going back.”

“Well, I’d prefer you never go back now but it’s something, I guess,” Remus says grouchily. “How are your edges tonight?”

Harry sighs and looks at the new green rubber band on his left wrist. He’s not had to pluck it all day which is strange, given what happened yesterday. He feels oddly calm.

“Weirdly okay,” Harry mumbles. “I guess I ... I know how to do this. Being at the Dursleys, I know how to survive that. It’s ... it’s not as hard as everything else.”

“That makes sense, Harry,” Remus strokes his back comfortingly. “Sometimes, traumas that we know can be familiar. I sometimes feel that way about my transformation. It’s painful and awful but at least it is pain I know how to manage.”

“Yeah,” Harry nods fervently. “Exactly.”

Remus lifts his hand to stroke the back of Harry’s hair. He’s not as good at it as Theo is, but it’s relaxing all the same.

“The thing is, Harry, sometimes because we know we can survive something, we think we have no right to change it,” Remus says quietly. “For years I went without Wolfsbane just because I knew that I could survive my transformation without it, even though I knew there was a better way.”

“You think ... you think I’d let them hurt me again?” Harry looks down at his arm, at the wrist that was fractured last summer. “Just because I know I can survive it?”

Or because you think you deserve it, Greenheart.

Harry gives Sahara a stern look as she quickly snaps up a spider.

You’re a snake, not a psychologist.

“I think we can all fall into automatic patterns when it comes to trauma,” Remus says sagely. “I just want you to remember tomorrow that you are no longer alone. We are here. We are never more than a message away and I hope you’ll remember that. You don’t have to suffer to survive this time. Can you remember that for me?”

“I can try,” Harry sighs and leans his head on Remus’ shoulder. “Thanks, Moony.”

“There’s another thing that Severus and I discussed,” Remus gently takes hold of Harry’s hand, carefully stroking the tattoo on his left hand. “Even without your Slytherin and Gryffindor rings, you still have two very powerful rings at your disposal and heir magic is not traceable.”

“But ... Bill said that the Ministry would be looking for any magic, no matter how it appears, that they’ll say I broke the law even if I didn’t,” Harry stares at Remus in astonishment because this seems like a very un-Remus thing to even suggest. “You ... you want me to do Heir magic anyway?”

“Do you know anything about Runes, Harry?” Remus asks quietly.

“Um ... not really. I have the runes on my back -,”

“The untraceable ones, yes,” Remus smiles. “I know. I want to teach you something that’s a bit ... different.”

“What is it?”

Remus looks up at the sky for a moment and lets out a long sigh.

“Do you remember what Theodore did for you in Skye?” He says quietly. “Do you remember what he used for you to walk again?”

“Blood runes,” Harry answers. “It’s ... it’s kind of illegal though, right?”

“It is,” Remus nods gently. “It is very dangerous. The only reason you survived Theodore’s blood runes was because ... well, because you’re you.”

“Mage power,” Harry grunts, remembering how he drew power from the centre of the earth. “Yeah.”

“This rune is not so dangerous,” Remus says, “at least not to a caster like you, but it will ... have an impact to cast.”

“What impact?” Harry asks curiously.

“Drowsiness, magical exhaustion, possibly a rune mark burned on your skin, whether temporary or not I cannot say.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Harry frowns at his godfather.

“Your rune on your back, Ansus reversed, it makes you untraceable,” Remus says softly. “This rune is different. If you cast this rune when you needed to, it would obliterate all evidence of any magic being cast before it.”

“So it’s like ... a magic delete button?” Harry whispers.

“As I said, it’s not without impact, casting it again and again would be dangerous if not impossible and it is only temporary,” Remus says. “The magical traces would emerge once the rune wears off but it would give you time.”

“Time for what?”

“To do what is necessary and get the hell out,” Remus says drily. This feels very much like something Sirius might say and Harry blinks, wondering if his living godfather is being temporarily possessed by the spirit of his dead one.

“Have you ever used it?” Harry asks nervously.

“Once,” Remus rolls up his sleeve. On his right bicep, Harry can see a mark on the scarred skin that is different, it looks intentional. It’s a circle, with a host of runes inside it.

“When?” Harry whispers, touching the slightly waxy, pale skin reverently.

“During a raid before Voldemort fell the first time,” Remus says.

“It looks like it burned,” Harry can feel a trace of magic in it, like the slight tingle in Bill’s *Anzar* rune. “Did it hurt?”

“Oh, very much,” Remus says wryly. “But Sirius was injured, we were inside enemy lines, so to speak, somewhere we shouldn’t have been and we needed to get out without a trace. James had to keep Sirius alive so I needed to do something to cover for us and I had read about this rune.”

“So you just did it?” Harry stares at his godfather who never seems to do anything on a whim. “Even though it could hurt you?”

“During the last war, we all carried magic in our back pocket that could hurt us but also be useful in a tight spot,” Remus says, his eyes reflective. “Sirius had the Black magic that he would never use, unless he had to, because it would make him very depressed. James was very good with fiendfyre but it could give him horrible burns. Lily had a charm she’d invented that could drown people from the inside out, she got it from an ancient manuscript, but it would give her terrible breathing problems for days. We all had something as a last resort. I had my blood rune.”

“Yours?” Harry’s head shoots up. “You *made* it?”

Remus shrugs casually as if using crazy rune magic to save Sirius and James wasn’t hardcore as fuck.

“Where do you think your mother and Severus got their interest in spellcraft?” Remus smiles. “My mother was excellent at it and I’ve always had a knack for rune carving.”

Harry stares at him.

“You are so fucking cool, Remus,” Harry whispers. Remus snorts with laughter and rolls down his sleeve.

“I am, am I?” He smiles at Harry. “Well, this isn’t about being cool. This is about you knowing your options.”

“You’re gonna teach me this? This illegal very dangerous blood rune?” Harry stares at his cardigan-loving godfather and can’t help thinking: *Sirius would be so damn proud of him for this.*

“Seriously?”

“As a last resort, you have to promise me it will only be that,” Remus says sternly. “But Severus and I are very clear on this. Whatever Bill thinks, whatever the risk, if *your life* is at risk and you need to use your magic to get out and be safe then we want you to use it.”

“Even if ... well, when the rune wears off they could trace it?” Harry breathes.

“No one would expect you to know this magic,” Remus says quietly. “They won’t come back in two days to check that house again.”

“What if they did though?” Harry asks nervously.

“Then we will shield you and hide you and defend you,” Remus says calmly. “It’s not as important as you being safe. You will be safe, Harry.”

Harry looks at Remus’ arm for a moment. He’s not sure he wants another mark on his skin but he wants to be beaten up by Vernon less.

“Okay,” he says, nodding. “What do I have to do?”

Remus pulls some chalk out of his pocket.

“I’ll show you what you have to draw and what words you need to speak as you cast, you would likely need to use a wand, I know, I know,” Remus says placatingly as Harry pulls a face, “I know it still uncomfortable for you but rune work requires a higher level of precision, especially when you are drawing in something as magically volatile as Creature blood -,”

Harry smiles. He likes that Remus calls him a Creature. He likes that Remus calls himself a Creature without any shame. Many things have been really very shit this year but Remus becoming bolder, fiercer, revealing how fucking cool he is now he’s a Congregation Ambassador, that has been truly excellent. So Harry happily watches, admiring once again Remus’ skill and kindness as he helps Harry draw with his trembling hands the correct shapes and sharp lines.

“Well done,” Remus says, rubbing his back. “You’ve got it.”

“It will be even harder in blood,” Harry huffs, looking down at the chalk on the slate tiles, glowing in the moonlight.

“Yes,” Remus admits. “But hopefully you will not have to use it.”

“I hope so,” Harry mutters. They sit in silence for a moment, looking at the shapes they have drawn together.

“Whatever happens, we love you so much, Harry,” Remus says, pulling Harry close and kissing the top of his head. Harry’s not sure if that’s true. He knows Remus loves him, but Severus? That’s another thing entirely. He knows Severus wants him to live. That’s enough. It’s more than Harry’s ever had before. Harry lets out a long breath.

“I love you too, Remus,” he says quietly.

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Return to Muggle Hell

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/RACIST AND HOMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE/child abuse)

This time, Harry, Hermione, Fred and George return to Privet Drive.
Next time, Theo hangs out with Draco. Chaos ensues.

Remember, if you are finding the tension between Harry/Theo too much, wait until the weekend to read the chapters. I think that will make it easier for you.

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

"Well," Harry swallows hard, standing in front of Petunia's begonias. *Here we fucking go again.*
"Welcome to muggle hell."

"Nice cat," George comments, reaching down to pet the tabby cat that sometimes likes to sit on the front wall.

"It's not Petunia's," Harry says, reaching down to tickle its ears affectionately so that it purrs. "She hates it. Says it looks like it's judging her. It's one of Figgy's, I think."

"Oh, we should drop in," Fred grins. Harry feels a twinge of joy hearing those words. Having Fred and George close by is definitely going to help matters.

"Are you allergic to cats?" Harry asks. "Seriously, she's got about twenty."

"No," George says, sneezing. The cat jumps away from him, looking insulted. "Not much, anyway."

"I've got some anti-histamines," Hermione digs in her backpack. "Hang on."

The front door to number four bangs open. It's Vernon. Just the sight of those measly eyes spreads a horrifying chill through Harry.

"Back again, are you?" Vernon sneers. Harry's stomach drops. He thinks of the way Severus had looked him steadily in the eyes that morning and told him quietly: *"If he so much as touches you, turn around and leave."*

Harry can't stop the pulse of panic that tremors through him. He feels a cold shimmer in his Black ring and suddenly, the twins are stepping in front of Harry. Fred is emitting some kind of low rumbling growl which is a pretty good impression of Remus.

"He's not on his own this time," George says in a deadly voice. "Got a problem?"

Vernon's face clouds over as he stares at George.

"You tried to kill my son," he growls, pointing at him. "With those bloody sweets."

"That was me actually," Fred's voice is light but his eyes flicker with glittery blackness for a flash. "But since you've nearly killed our Lord a bunch of times, I think we're even."

"Not helping," Harry mutters, feeling Hermione grip his arm tightly.

"Vernon!" a sharp voice snaps. Petunia appears in the doorway behind Vernon. "Go to work. I'll deal with this."

Vernon scowls and walks to his car, a new jaguar, his eyes fixed on Harry.

"You owe me three hundred pounds, boy," he snarls. "Fines from your criminal joyride not to mention the cost of replacing the damn car -,"

Just for the hell of it, because it's his instinct with Vernon, Harry decides to stir the pot.

"It wasn't me, a wizard drove the car," Harry sneers. "Used the seat warmers too."

Vernon looks apoplectic and takes a step towards Harry, only for George to take a step forward, eyes gleaming. Harry can smell his magic, aniseedy and bright.

"Whilst we're talking, there's the matter of the cat flap and the bars on the window to be sorted, isn't there?" George says.

"Who are you to even question me about what goes on in my home?" Vernon blusters.

"Vernon, the neighbours!" Petunia barks. Vernon retreats. His eyes hold a promise of violence but Harry doesn't care. The tethers around his wrist are tight as piano wire and he will fuck off Dumbledore's whole deal entirely before he lets this man hit him ever again. Vernon scowls and leaves. The twins wait until the car is down the end of the cul-de-sac before they step aside.

"Charming," Fred mutters.

"Everything we expected," George mutters back.

"I agreed to the girl," Petunia says the word like it is horrible, her eyes flickering over Hermione's face with dislike before settling on Fred and George. "Not these two."

"That's fine," Fred grins nastily. "We're just staying around the corner. We'll be popping in every day and you can either invite us in or we'll just park ourselves here, won't we George?"

"Yes." George pulls two striped deckchairs out of his magically expanded duffel back. "We will."

"Get in!" Petunia glares at Harry and then sniffs at the twins. "The back garden only."

"Fine," Fred says, cheerily folding up the chairs. "We'll leave our stuff with Figgy and floo call Bill to check in."

"We'll be back in an hour," George says, squeezing Harry's shoulder and glaring at Petunia. "In the garden."

A lot can happen in an hour, Harry thinks, but he nods. Fred seems to notice and steps closer.

"Hey," he says quietly, nodding at Harry's ear. "It's time."

Harry nods and Fred carefully places the ear cuff on Harry's left ear. Harry staggers slightly under the weight of the wards, feels them all around him, like water in the air, and Hermione grips his elbow tight.

"You okay?" She whispers.

"Yeah fine," Harry grunts. "It's just gonna take some getting used to."

But the list of things Harry has to get used to is long and one of them is the feeling, suddenly, of how much is pressing against the wards. He imagines suddenly hordes of Death Eaters, hundreds of Ministry employees, all of the Order of the Phoenix, all just waiting, invisible on the other side of the wards. He feels like he did on the Hogwarts Express after Christmas, like a fish in a glass bowl, except now it's worse. Now it's like he's a goldfish in a plastic that's been dropped in a shark tank. He takes a shuddering breath and suddenly, despite his best instincts, very much wants to be inside the house. *At least then they're not looking at me.*

"Let's get inside," he says quietly, waving to Fred and George as they set off down the street. Harry winced as he feels them cross the boundary of the wards, it's a persistent tingle down his arms, as if he's slept on them funny. He and Hermione cross the threshold of number four again.

Here we go, Harry thinks. Petunia stands aside to let them in. She sniffs as her eyes rake over Harry, carelessly taking in his scarred and mutilated left hand and the tattoo. If she notices he's not white anymore she doesn't say a word. *Like she even cares.*

"Disgusting," she mutters, slamming the door closed. Harry stares at it and has to fight the rise of panic inside him. Hermione grabs his hand, squeezing it tightly, and he tastes tea. Harry takes a deep breath. *I can do this. I can fucking do this. I've been doing it for fifteen years.*

"Where did you get that?" Petunia hisses, her eyes snagging on Hermione's ring. Harry's mum's engagement ring. Harry holds onto Hermione protectively as she sucks in her breath, giving him a nervous look.

"I gave it to her," Harry says.

"Of course you did," Petunia scoffs. "Just like him, aren't you?"

Harry just stares at her. The woman must be utterly deluded to see any of James Potter in him now.

"Are you normal?" Petunia demands, staring at Hermione distastefully.

"My parents aren't wixen, if that's what you mean," Hermione asks quietly. Petunia flinches at the word but scowls deeply and points at Harry.

"If you have any sense at all, girl, you'll go back where you came from and forget about this horrible boy and everything he promised you."

Petunia stares at him with such complete hatred that Harry feels a weird surge of familiarity. The smell of bleach mingled with the tang of twenty-year-old potpourri, the ugly lavender and fuchsia repeating pattern in the wallpaper, it's all the same. Nothing has changed here for the last fifteen years. He is loathed here, the same as always. *Remus is right*, Harry thinks dazedly, *there's familiarity in this bullshit*.

"Harry doesn't make promises he can't keep," Hermione says. Harry wants to tell her to not bother defending him, that it's not worth the energy, but his mouth seems to be sewn tightly shut. He stares at the horrible welcome doormat under his feet. The last time he stood on it, he was bleeding everywhere and Kreacher was holding him up. He wonders how long it took Petunia to get the drops of blood out of the brown bristles.

"What do your parents think?" Petunia sneers, folding her arms. "That you've taken up with a little criminal?"

It's not an unfair characterisation, Harry thinks, but he feels Hermione stiffen.

"My parents like Harry," she says, which is a kind thing to say since Harry has only ever met them at Kings Cross. Petunia looks like such a thing would be impossible and then narrows her eyes at Hermione.

"And what do they do?" she asks sarcastically.

"They're dentists," Hermione snaps. "They live in France."

"French. Of course," Petunia looks like she has just uncovered something that both disgusts her and gives her tremendous triumph. "Well, if you know what's good for you, you'll go home. Even a French sleaze would be better than this disaster." Petunia gestures to Harry. "The Potters bring nothing but grief."

"And the Dursleys bring what, exactly?" Harry glares at Petunia, knowing exactly how to piss her off. "Badly trimmed hedges and overwatered hanging baskets?"

"It's fine, Harry," Hermione looks up at Petunia steadily, sweetly. "I'm not French, I'm from Clapham. My parents aren't sleazes, they own a dental practice. I know what the Potters bring." Hermione looks fondly at Harry. "Lily Potter got the highest score in a Charms NEWT of anyone to go to Hogwarts in fifty years. James Potter passed his entrance exam for law enforcement with eighty-five percent, one of the highest scores of his year. But please, tell me more about how I should choose better." Hermione tilts her head to look up into Petunia's taut face. "What is it your husband does? Sells ... drills, is it?"

Petunia has blanched an ugly creamy colour and Harry leans over and actually kisses Hermione on the cheek. Only a muggleborn would know how to fight this particular battle of Keeping Up Appearances and he's triumphant when Petunia flinches.

"I agreed to let you stay here for the safety of my family but don't you *ever* speak her name in my house," Petunia says hoarsely.

"Some things never change," Harry mutters since he thinks this is the first time he's heard his Mum's name spoken in front of Petunia.

"Fine," Hermione nods and looks at Harry. "Cup of tea, then?"

Harry can't help but look at Petunia, instinctively checking to see if withholding access to the kitchen is going to be one of the things she uses against him in the next four days. She twitches her eyelid and Harry leads Hermione into the kitchen. Harry sees the padlocks on the cupboards and rolls his eyes. Harry fills the kettle and pulls teabags out of the china caddy next to it.

"Okay without milk?" he asks Hermione as she stares at the chain on the fridge, nostrils flaring. She nods. Harry knows she can't speak right now because if she does, she will yell, and she's probably saving that for when Fred and George are back, so he digs out a teaspoon and searches the only unlocked cupboard for sugar. Next to the tins of beans that fill Harry with queasiness and remind him of the cat flap, there are a couple of sachets of Splenda. He adds it liberally and hears heavy, familiar footsteps over his shoulder.

"Here we go," Harry murmurs to Hermione as he stirs. "I'm sorry."

"You've brought a bird."

Hermione stiffens but Harry just rolls his eyes and turns to face Dudley. He beefed out even more this year, his shoulders broad and muscular and his blonde hair is darkened by hair gel. He's got a key on a necklace and is playing with it with a smug expression. Harry knows it's the key to the fridge. Hermione is glaring at him.

"Hermione, this is Dudley," Harry mutters.

"Hi," Hermione says shortly but Dudley barely looks at her, focusing on Harry.

"You're not white anymore," Dudley accuses. "You look like a paki."

"Excuse me?" Hermione hisses.

"What are you talking about?" Harry raises an eyebrow, deciding to fuck with Dudley if he can. "I've always looked like this."

"No, you haven't."

"Oh yeah?" Harry drawls. "Because people can just randomly change race, can they? Really smart, Dudders."

"Well, your sort probably can," Dudley sneers, wrinkling his nose as he looks Harry up and down. "Look at you, you look like a criminal. You've got tattoos and look!" Dudley laughs and points at Harry's hand. "You're a cripple too! What did you do? Did that fucking owl eat it?"

"Can you kindly stop?" Hermione's voice is edged with fury, her Potter ring singing softly in defiance. Dudley ignores her.

"You might have changed how you look but bringing a girl here doesn't make you less bent, Potty," he grins, leaning against the kitchen doorframe.

"Oh, original name, did you think of that yourself?" Hermione snaps.

"Doesn't she know?" Dudley's eyes widen with excitement. "Doesn't your girlfriend know that your bent?"

"Shut up, Dudley," Harry rolls his eyes, but it does nothing.

"Oh ho, I guess you haven't done *it* yet then, or she'd have heard you screaming like a bellend for your pansy boyfriend, *Cedric* - ,"

"Never gets old," Harry mutters. Hermione, however, is looking at Dudley the same way she looks at Malfoy.

"You can shut up," Hermione says coldly. "I know more than you do and I don't need your bigoted opinions."

"Oh, so you don't mind a lad who sucks dick?" Dudley wiggles his eyebrows in what Harry thinks might be Dudley's effort at flirting. It makes him feel a bit sick. "Must be, like, an exotic thing. Where are you from, by the way?"

"Jesus, Diddykins, really lean into the stereotype," Harry sneers.

"I'm from Clapham," Hermione snaps.

"No, where are you *from*?"

"Okay, we're done," Harry snarls, slamming the lid on the tea caddy closed, sparks jumping out of his fingertips. Dudley takes a rapid step back, his eyes wide.

"You're not allowed to do it outside school," Dudley says shakily.

"Maybe they changed the rules," Harry shrugs, letting a few sparks settle at his fingertips. "Maybe you're wrong about lots of things."

"Not about you," Dudley says, his voice suddenly vicious. "I remember that boy from last summer, the one who wanted to kill me. I saw the way he looked at you and you were all tight in the trousers for him, too! You're still a *faggot* , and I'm not wrong about that."

"Say that again," Hermione growls, pulling out her wand and pushing it under Dudley's chin. His eyes widen.

"You - you can't!" he stammers, blue eyes flitting to Harry's face. "Stop her!"

"She's not doing anything," Harry says, picking up both of their mugs of tea. Hermione is breathing heavily, her Potter ring glowing red. "Yet."

"You're scum," Hermione says fiercely. "Probably nothing will change that but you won't talk about my brother like that ever again or I promise you, the ten-ton-toffees will seem like Werthers *fucking* Originals when I'm done with you."

"Brother?" Dudley sputters.

"Adopted," Harry says. "C'mon, Mi. It's not worth it."

Hermione pokes Dudley firmly in the jugular and then pulls away from him, following Harry up the stairs. Harry can hear her breathing heavily. It's only when Harry has closed the door to his bedroom and Hermione has inhaled sharply when she sees the padlocks on it, that she speaks.

"This is ..." She stares at the blood stains on the floorboards. When she looks up at Harry, her eyes are brimming with tears and rage. "This is so much worse than I ever thought it would be."

Harry shrugs. He hates the room even more now that it isn't full of boxes of books and Black artefacts. When it's just the desk with no Hedwig and the floorboards with no cake under them and Harry's bed with no Theo sitting on it.

"It's whatever," Harry says. He sits on the bed, flinching when he remembers the last time he laid on it. He takes a sip of his tea and winces, the manufactured sweetness of Splenda making him miss Severus' collection of local honey. Oddly, he doesn't feel the need to snap his rubber band. He's not sure he feels the need for anything.

"It's not whatever," Hermione sighs and sits beside him. She looks down into her tea. "It's one thing to hear about it and know it but to see ... all this."

Her eyes drift over the sparseness of his room and uncomfortably, Harry sees it for what it is through her eyes. A room for an unloved and unwanted child. A sign of neglect, disinterest and disdain. A prison cell.

"Yeah." Harry thinks about how it felt to see burns on Theo's wrists. "It's always worse to see it happening to someone else."

"This is something I'll never, ever forgive him for," Hermione whispers.

"Who?"

"Dumbledore," Hermione takes a sip of her tea and purses her lips. Harry can't tell if it's the terrible tea or mentioning his name aloud. "You had a named godfather who *wasn't* in Azkaban and he sent you here."

"I don't think he thought it was possible they would hate me so much," Harry shakes his head ruefully.

"That's bollocks, Harry," Hermione grips her mug tightly. "You don't get to be as important and politically cognisant as he is without understanding the real world. He must have checked. He must have known."

Harry sighs. He knows Dumbledore's not innocent, he knows he played a role but he also knows that Hermione doesn't get it. She doesn't know how easy it is to hide this kind of thing. Harry remembers visits as a child, he remembers Petunia filling his cupboard with brooms and putting up a fake zedbed in Dudley's room, using the pretence of 'Oh, Harry's room is being redecorated!' to explain it all. Harry's heard every excuse, every version of his life explained away to nosy neighbours, curious teachers, even people he suspects, looking back on it, could have been Wixen Dumbledore sent to check. It would always have been Harry's word against Petunia's and Harry was always too scared to say a word.

"Maybe not before Hogwarts," he says quietly. "People don't want to see it, most of the time."

That was horrible truth, wasn't it? Harry is prepared to think a lot of nasty things about Dumbledore, he knows that he had told Severus and Remus to leave him with Bellatrix, he knows that Dumbledore had deliberately kept him isolated and alone last summer, but the most horrible thing is probably that Dumbledore didn't *want* to see what was going on in number four, Privet Drive. Hermione thinks it's harder to forgive him for knowing about it and choosing, the way Dumbledore does with people's lives, to prioritise something else. Harry doesn't agree. It's much

harder, he thinks, to forgive Dumbledore, the man who was supposed to be his saviour, for not looking carefully enough to notice.

"Then he should have moved you after first year," Hermione says. "When you told him."

Harry isn't sure, anymore, that he ever did. No one ever asked him, that was for sure.

"I ... maybe I downplayed it, Mi."

Harry swallows. He can't remember all the different ways he tried to hide it.

"You were scared," Hermione whispers.

"Not all the time," Harry swallows some tea slowly. He remembers seeing the Weasley's on platform 9 and 3/4 for the first time, the casual love and intimacy between them all. "A lot of the time I was just ... ashamed."

"Why?" Hermione presses a hand against his knee.

"Because everyone had parents. Even Neville had his Gran. People to write to, people who cared. I didn't have that, only Hagrid and I'd only known him a week." Harry stares at Hermione's hand and the Potter ring on it. "Everyone thought I was great, that I was special. I was ashamed they'd find out about this place. That I was really nothing, after all."

"Harry," Hermione's voice is shaking. "You are very fucking special."

"In all the worst ways, right?" Harry jokes darkly. He's not told Hermione about compelling Malfoy. He doesn't ever want to if he can help it. He doesn't think he could bear her disappointment in him.

"Fleur says you're the best kind of boy, pretty and polite," Hermione says. Harry gawks at her and then bursts into laughter.

"Pretty and polite? Jesus!" Harry gasps. "What's Fleur then, pretty and impolite?"

"She's not really like that now," Hermione smiles shyly. "I think the language barrier didn't help."

"Blimey, Mi, what would Greengrass say?" Harry teases.

"Fleur's just a friend," Hermione blushes. *For now*, Harry thinks. "She's too old for me, Harry, but it's nice to have a friend to talk about things with."

"A cool, lesbian French friend you write weekly letters to?" Harry teases.

"Precisely," Hermione says primly.

Harry shakes his head in amusement. He opens his rucksack, pulling out his journal and checking it.

How are you?

I'm fine. Talking to Hermione.

Is she well?

Fine too.

"I still think you should tell him," Hermione says. She is pulling an airbed and a pump out of the rucksack that Fred magically expanded for her.

"I know," Harry swallows hard. He can't escape a creeping fear, an agonising ache in his chest that he can't ignore. *Tell him*, the ache seems to whisper. *Tell him now*. He begins to fit the nozzle on the foot pump. "But I'm here now. Telling him now ... he'd only worry."

"He's worrying anyway," Hermione mutters. "Anyone would."

"Why do you care what I say to Theo?" Harry starts pumping, air squeaking into the plastic bed.

"Because he holds grudges and he could kill me," Hermione snaps. "More importantly, he'll stop sharing his Runes notes with me."

"Classic," Harry rolls his eyes.

"Last year, all you did was keep secrets from me and tell him everything," Hermione begins to pull her duvet out of her bag like an extra long, puffy magician's handkerchief. "What changed?"

"Me," Harry says shortly, thinking of the veil and everything beyond it. *I changed and I don't know how to protect him from myself.*

"You're an idiot," Hermione throws a pillow at his head.

"I'm ... I'm trying not to be," Harry says with a swallow, thinking of the crystal knives made of magic in the basement of Spinner's End. *I'm trying every day not to kill myself.* Hermione stops and stares at him for a moment.

"Are your edges bad?" She asks quickly.

Harry stares at the airbed. He wants to tell Hermione. He should tell Hermione. Then he thinks of the tears in her eyes when she caught him in the Astronomy Tower. *I absolutely cannot tell Hermione.*

"Been better," Harry says lightly. Severus and Remus and Magnus know. That will have to be enough.

You should be truthful with your nest mates, Greenheart. They can keep you safe in this hostile nest.

I'm fine.

You lie to yourself as easily as you lie to others, Greenheart.

Harry flinches slightly. He doesn't *want* to be a liar. Not really. He remembers Petunia gripping his arm so tightly it hurt as she dragged him along the road to primary school: *And what do we do when someone asks about the bruise?* Harry remembers how his voice was nothing more than a mumble. *I fell.* Inside his small mind, he chanted the words: *Lie, lie, lie.* Harry has been lying to

survive his whole life. As he pumps the airbed and stands in the room that has been his prison for so long, he doesn't know if he can be any different.

Maybe they broke me completely.

"I think I might kill your cousin, by the way," Hermione says darkly.

"No books in Azkaban," Harry quips, throwing the pillow back.

"It would almost be worth it," Hermione mutters. She pulls a set of sheets out of her bag, but they are definitely not Hermione's style. They're covered in dragons. When Harry looks closer, he sees the dragons breathing fire and chasing something. A boy on a broom.

"Hermione?" Harry reaches out and brushes a finger against the Hungarian horntail as it rears up.

"Me and Ron made them, Zabini and the twins helped with the spell work," Hermione smiles at him.

"For my birthday?" Harry swallows hard.

"No, just for this trip," Hermione says, her magic suddenly surging with the smell of blackberries, fierce and sharp. "Something to remind you of who you are. Whatever *they* say about you here, Harry, you are *not* nothing."

"Yeah." Harry thinks of the compulsion he put on Draco Malfoy three days ago. He thinks of the obscurus he helped send to the land beyond. He thinks of Severus telling him he's not a monster. Today, Harry isn't sure if he believes him. "I'm something."

There's a loud knock on the door. Both Harry and Hermione jump.

"They're in the garden," Petunia snaps through it. "They're not to come in the house, you understand me?"

"Yes," Harry calls back then lowers his voice so only Hermione can hear. "Lucky them."

Hermione snorts and looks down at the half-inflated air bed.

"Let's leave this. I'd rather be in the garden with Fred and George than here," Hermione glances at the bars on the window. "No offence."

"None taken," Harry says. "One second though. Kreacher!"

Kreacher appears, looking around the room with disgust.

"Master called?" he says, eyes fixing on the blood-stained floorboards with a frown.

"I need you to pick Sahara up from Spinners End and take her to Theo," Harry says, pulling one of Remus' old jumpers out of his backpack. "Remus can feed Hedwig."

"Kreacher desires jellied young," Kreacher croaks. "Or gnome blood droplets."

"What?" Hermione frowns.

"Jelly babies," Harry sighs. "Or skittles. Fine, but maximum two bags of each."

"Where do you get them?" Hermione looks at Kreacher inquisitively. "You can hardly walk into Sainsbury's."

"Kreacher has his ways," Kreacher cackles.

"Do not steal from Mr Khan at the end of the road," Harry points his finger at Kreacher threateningly. "I mean it, but the big supermarket is fine."

"Fight the power," Hermione mutters.

"What about familiar's food?" Kreacher looks pointedly at Harry's neck and the bites that Severus has been glamouring for him. Remus still doesn't know and Harry thinks that's probably for the best.

"She'll be okay for a few days," Harry says neutrally. He knows that if Sahara really needs him, all she has to do is ask.

I can always find you, Greenheart.

I know. But don't, okay? Vernon will sit on you.

I would eat him.

You'd be sick.

It would be worth it.

Harry smirks and shakes his head. Kreacher is already pulling Harry's clothes out of his rucksack and carrying them to the cupboard. Harry wonders why, but then he remembers what Bill said about some house elf magic being traceable and knows that Kreacher is trying to avoid trouble.

"Kreacher will go when the room is ready," Kreacher says, not looking up from his task. "Familiar will be sleeping anyway."

"By tonight then," Harry says. "Hey! What did I say about Hermione's stuff?"

Kreacher looks up guiltily from where he is in the middle of rummaging through Hermione's rucksack.

"It's fine, Harry," Hermione says, tugging his arms. "Let's go to the garden."

"You'll regret it, Mi, he'll turn everything he finds black and silver," Harry says as they walk back down the stairs. "You can't give him any leeway, you know that."

"House elves are misunderstood," Hermione says sagely.

"They might be, but Kreacher isn't," Harry says. "Kreacher's a dick."

"Harry!"

"Do you know how much I've spent on sweets in the last year?" Harry protests. "Griphook sent me an invoice. It's more than my textbooks."

They both ignore Dudley who is watching TV in the sitting room with the volume up extremely loudly and glaring through the french doors at the Twins, who are sitting in deckchairs around what seems to be a muggle barbecue.

"Hey!" Fred says, holding up some lighter fluid and matches. "Figgy gave them to us. Any ideas?"

"Oh Jesus," Hermione mutters, swooping in to snatch both items out of Fred's hands. "Don't touch this stuff without checking with me first!"

"Calm down, 'Mione," George grins. He is rifling through a small cool bag. "Harry, how do you cook burgers?"

"Are you both utterly dependent upon your mother?" Hermione snaps.

"No," George hands the packet of burgers to Harry, "but burgers are not exactly traditional British Wixen cuisine. No American diners in Diagon Alley."

"George makes an excellent rabbit pie," Fred says reasonably, staring as Hermione sprinkles lighter fluid on the coals and then sets matches to them. "That went up fast. Is it some kind of alcohol?"

"If I let you read the back of this packet, you have to promise you're not going to mess around with it outside of your own shop, okay?" Hermione holds the bottle out with a cautious expression.

"Wouldn't dream of it, do you think I'm an idiot? *Woah!*" Fred's eyes widen as he reads the back of the bottle. "Petroleum goes in cars, right?"

"Cars and food?" George frowns as Harry uses Mrs Figgs' cat-themed tongs to lay the burgers on the grill. "Weird."

"What's weird is having burgers for breakfast," Harry says. He glances in through the window and sees the look of absolute hunger etched on Dudley's face. He smirks. This might actually be fun.

"Figgy was out of sausages," George shrugs. "Oh, here you go. From Bill."

George tosses Harry an odd-looking item, which looks like an hourglass going in reverse, blue sand slowly trickling up from the bottom.

"Interesting," Hermione says, wiping her hands on Fred's t-shirt and examining it carefully. "What does it do?"

"It exactly times when the protection will be recharged," George reaches down for a thermos by the cool bag and pulls a few chipped, cat mugs out of a tote bag. "Coffee, Harry?"

"Please." Harry looks at the pile of blue sand in the bottom of the hourglass and thinks it looks like it's about a week's worth. "It's going really slowly."

"It will speed up by tomorrow," Fred says, looking up from the bottle of lighter fluid to glare at the bricks of number four. "It will go faster if you stay on the property at all times."

"Jesus," Harry mutters. George hands him a cup of coffee and smiles lopsidedly.

"It'll be okay," he says softly. "We'll hang out here during the day with you until you want to go to sleep and then we'll pop back to Figgy's."

"You don't have to do that, it's not so bad," Harry says immediately, though Hermione is glaring at him like it is. "It'll be fine during the day when Vernon's at work."

If there's one thing he knows how to do in this life, it's handle Petunia and dodge Dudley.

"We'll be in the garden," George says firmly. "When you're asleep, Kreacher will be there. We've given him some goblin alarms to set on your door, just in case. We're handling your Uncle."

"He's not going to touch you," Fred says. His eyes glitter dangerously for a moment. "Not again."

"Thanks," Harry swallows hard. The scars on his back tingle. He flips the burgers, watching the fat drip onto the charcoal and sizzle. "You don't have to."

"Guardsmen," Fred says with a shrug. Harry feels a tingle in his Black ring and smiles.

Since Grimmauld Place, Fred and George have taken to their Guardsmen roles in different ways. Fred is more prone to react to direct threats to Harry's body, a glimmer of black flickering across his eyes. Harry always smells it in his magic, an overwhelming scent of liquorice that pours off him. Fred has also been upping his ante with Blaise, the two of them pursuing every grey Wizengamot under the sun for alliances and some "dark" ones too. Or at least, that's how it seems to Harry since George sends Harry house in arms and no wands treaties to sign once or twice a week. George's attitude to being a Guardsman seems to mainly involve surveillance and administration. He gives Harry regular updates from Order of the Phoenix meetings so Harry knows roughly what trouble Severus and Remus are getting into, and Harry is pretty sure he's monitoring Harry's movements and post. Whilst Fred's magic seems to come in surges, a wave of liquorice scent when Harry is threatened, George's is constant. A fennel-scented background to every minute Harry spends in his company. Harry looks at them and knows that Arthur would be really fucking proud.

"This is from Snape," George says quietly, pulling a couple of vials out of his pocket and passing them to Harry. "He wants memories at the end of the day to put in the pensive."

Harry takes them wordlessly. He and Severus haven't discussed it since the lesson with Bill and Magnus yesterday, but Harry knows Severus is intent on collecting data if Harry ever decides to press charges against the Dursleys. How pensive memories would work in the muggle court system, Harry has no idea, but he has no doubt that Remus would find a way, and Harry did say that he would be ready. *I will be ready. I have to be ready. Why is this the thing that feels so hard to be ready for?*

"Was he alright?" Harry asks tightly. He supposed George jumped through the floo at Mrs Figgs to tell Severus they'd arrived in one piece. Just thinking about his Sire makes him more aware of the tether, of the stretched feeling he is carrying with him all the time.

"The same," Fred rolls his eyes.

"He's a scary duellist," George says.

"How do you know that?" Hermione asks.

"He's been teaching us," Fred sips his coffee. "For Dolohov."

Harry's stomach clenches at the thought.

"Why does Dolohov want you?" Hermione frowns. Sometimes, Harry forgets that she and Ron couldn't get down into the Department of Mysteries. They didn't see the way Dolohov went for the twins and vice versa.

"Because George tried to drown him in a puddle," Harry says. Fred spits out his coffee with a grin.

"Yeah, and because our uncles fucked him up," Fred says, voice proud. "Ugly wanker."

"Mum's terrified," George says quietly. "He killed both of them. There was a duel in 1981 when Mum was pregnant with Gin. It's why she went into labour early, because she heard they were dead. She and Ginny nearly died too."

"That's awful," Hermione whispers.

"Yeah. Mum's Dad straight after Uncle Fab and Uncle Gid and then we nearly lost mum," George's eyes are fixed on his coffee. "We were only four, we don't really remember it, just ..."

"Bill looking after us, Dad being scared, that kind of thing," Fred's eyes are full of fire. "So we'll get Dolohov. For our uncles."

They fall into an unsettling silence. Hermione is looking at Fred with slightly damp eyes and Harry wishes there was a way to stop whatever is coming next. He feels a chill at the back of his neck and then hears her voice in his ear: *We are coming next, Master.*

"Hey," he says, trying to pretend he doesn't hear her. "Did you know that Remus had a crush on your uncles when he was twelve?"

It's Hermione's turn to almost choke on her coffee. The twins grin widely, eyes lighting up with excitement.

"That is excellent," Fred chuckles. "We look like them, apparently, do you think I could get with Moony?"

"Ew, *don't!*" Hermione shoves him hard. "That's basically saying you want to shag Harry's Dad!"

"It's not my favourite, I'll admit," Harry says drily.

"I'm joking," Fred grins. "Besides, it's not like I'm going to take my chances going up against Snape of all people."

"*What?*" Hermione rounds on Harry, face a cross between irritated and indignant. "Really?"

"Please, please do not make talk about this," Harry groans. He is persistently not thinking about Severus and Remus and that includes not speaking about it.

"You know, I was on the ward in the hospital wing when we came back from the Ministry," George grins. "They were behind the curtain and Moony definitely didn't have any trousers on -,"

"Gross," Harry pulls a face and throws a burger bun at George's face. "Stop."

"I just ... I can't ..." Hermione looks like her mind has short-circuited. "Professor Lupin and Professor *Snape*?"

"Is it because they're professors that it's blowing your mind?" Fred wiggles his eyebrows. "Because it is definitely not unprecedented. Haven't you ever wondered why Professor Sinistra spends so much time with Firenze?"

"He's a *centaur*!" Hermione exclaims.

"That's a bonus, surely," Harry grins.

"Wow, Potter, I had no idea," Fred nudges him.

"You try being rescued by a centaur at eleven," Harry grumbles, flushing, trying not to remember Firenze's chiselled muscles in the moonlight. "It does something to you."

"I'd quite like a vampire myself," George says, with a slightly dreamy expression.

"You're insane," Hermione snaps. "Vampires don't take wixen lovers except as food sources."

"I can think of worse things to be," George quips.

"Magnus has a vampire ex, Camille," Harry shakes his head. "Sounds like more trouble than it's worth. Maybe you could date a Slayer, George."

"Nah, Slayer's are always too busy," George rolls his eyes. "Chosen one malarky and all that."

"Doesn't stop Harry," Fred grins, elbowing him.

"Fuck off," Harry grumbles. "I'm not a chosen anything."

"Wait, a vampire named Camille ... not Camille Belcourt?" Hermione's eyes widen and she punches Harry in the shoulder. "Harry!"

"What?" Harry exclaims, rubbing his arm.

"Camille Belcourt was a friend of Ragnor Fell, the most notorious daemon in London!" Hermione's eyes glitter the same way they do when she finds out Harry's been hiding books from her. "Together they wrote a seminal treatise on vampires that the Wizengamot relies on even today!"

"And what do you want me to do about that?" Harry asks blankly.

"Honestly!" Hermione glares at him. "Stop hogging all the important historical figures."

"I really don't think you want to hang out with Camille, Mi, she sounds fucking mental," Harry says. Magnus makes light of the fact that Camille has tried to kill him, more than once, but Harry thinks that reason enough to avoid someone.

"But think of the knowledge!" Hermione croons and the others stare at one another like she is mad.

"So George can have a vampire," Fred says, giving his brother a poke. "Harry can have Firenze -,"

"I don't *want* Firenze -,"

"What do you say, Hermione?" Fred elbows her. "Me and Blaise are still offering."

"*Blaise and I*," George rolls his eyes. "However you say it, it's still insufferable."

"You and Zabini can shove your offer," Hermione snaps. "Approaching women for threesomes does not look flattering on either of you."

"Come on," Fred looks a little hurt. "It's not that."

Hermione looks a little surprised by the tenderness in Fred's expression. Harry reckons that Hermione has chronically underestimated exactly how powerful an impact she has upon boys. Particularly Blaise and, now it seems, Fred too.

"I'm just ... I only just broke up with Ginny," Hermione stammers, looking flustered as she looks to Harry for help. She's clearly not ready to disclose to everyone how she feels about being gay. Harry thinks Fred and George would try to understand, even though Wixen sexuality is so fluid they don't really have notions of this kind of thing, but Harry wants Hermione to be comfortable.

"Bit soon," Harry says, grabbing Hermione's hand and squeezing it. "NEWTS to focus on, as well as surviving this shit show. That's a lot for anyone's plate."

"Yeah exactly," Hermione nods gratefully and then looks at Fred with an unsure expression. "I'm ... glad you're happy with him, though."

"Thanks," Fred smiles, utterly unflustered. "We're having fun."

"Loudly, whenever he drops into the shop, in our store room," George mutters. Harry smirks and sees that Hermione looks relieved. That's the thing about what Fred and Blaise have that probably unsettles her a little. They are both seem to be essentially lighthearted individuals, taking nothing too seriously but Harry knows differently. He's tasted and sensed both of their magics, he knows the ferocity and power inside them; aniseed and blood. There's an unpredictability to the pair of them that Harry knows has the potential to stir some shit. Harry can see why Hermione, his serious, thoughtful Mi, feels more comfortable around the steady attention of Fleur communicated through weekly letters or from Daphne, who brings calm wherever she goes.

"Well, here's to the next four days, two hours and thirty-five minutes," Fred lifts his mug with a ginger cat on up in a toast. "May they pass at the speed of a rampaging hippogriff."

"I'm feeling lucky," George winks, clinking his mug against Harry's. Harry smiles tightly and takes a sip of his coffee. He thinks that no one is lucky in number four, Privet Drive, least of all Harry Potter. He tries to remember what Remus said last night on the roof, *you are not alone, Harry*, but he can't stop his mind from churning. Memories of being here, last summer, raw and distraught about Cedric are pulsing incessantly through his mind. *He loved me and he died. I'm surrounded by people who love me. How many of them will die?* Harry sips his coffee and tries to ignore the sensation of a cold hand on his shoulder and Death's whisper in his ear: *we are coming, Master*. He tries not to choke on his coffee.

"Gonna get some water," he croaks, heading back into the cool interior of the house. He fills a glass of water at the sink and tries not to let his hand tremble.

“Do they know what you’re like?”

Harry’s not at all surprised. He swallows carefully and turns to face Dudley. He’s leaning against the door with his arms crossed.

“What?” Harry tries to keep control of his voice.

“Your mates out there,” Dudley jerks his head and sneers at Harry. “Do they know the truth about you?”

“What’s that, Diddykins?”

“It looks like you’ve told them some shit about Mum and Dad,” Dudley says, his eyes like flint as he moves forward. A year boxing down the gym has probably made him even stronger. *But I’m strong too now*, Harry thinks distantly. “Probably some sob story of how they hurt you, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a real page-turner,” Harry says coldly.

“So you didn’t tell them the truth then,” Dudley’s eyes are victorious. “Didn’t tell them about all the times you freaked out? Flying on the fucking roof and all that shit?”

“We can all fly,” Harry lies easily. “It’s not that weird. Close your bedroom windows.”

Dudley snorts derisively.

“You’re a liar. You’ve always been a liar.”

Well, that’s true, Harry thinks and shrugs. *It’s what your parents made me*. Dudley steps closer. Harry fights the urge to step back. He will not let Dudley corner him in the kitchen.

“Thing is, I know you, Potter,” Dudley says, breathing heavily as he gets up into Harry’s space. Harry clenches his fists. He doesn’t want to have to draw the rune already. It’s the last resort and this isn’t a last resort situation. This is just Dudley. *I can do this. I’ve done this my whole life*. “I know you better than those weirdos do. They think you’re some kind of cool shit like you survived something hard? Like you’re a fighter?”

“What, like you, Big D?” Harry says, automatically. *I don’t care if he hits me. I don’t give a shit*. “Chasing cats with a taser?”

“And *you*,” Dudley snarls, not moving any closer. “That’s the thing they don’t know, isn’t it? You’re not a survivor, you little fag. You *let* me do it. You always let me.”

Harry’s blood runs cold. He remembers Umbridge leering over him, her sweet, insipid voice: *People shall think you have done this to yourself. After all, it is not a lie, is it?* Harry suddenly wishes Dudley would touch him, and make a move because Harry is desperate with liquid fury suddenly to shoot sparks straight into Dudley’s eyes.

Such viciousness, little weapon.

Fuck off, Tom.

Tell him, not me. Kill him, my sweet little viper.

Harry swallows hard and pulls up the Not-Caring, letting it drown out Tom's voice. This, Harry realises, is the thing nobody anticipated in all their preparations for his return to Privet Drive: Tom, creeping into Harry's head through his anger because when Harry is in Privet Drive, he is always angry. So Harry floods himself with the Not-Caring, just like he did with Sirius and with Dumbledore.

It doesn't matter what he says. I don't care.

"Yeah, fine, I let you," Harry says flatly. "Now fuck off."

Dudley laughs softly and grins at Harry.

"You know why, right?" He sneers. "Because you *like it*. You're a sick little *pervert*."

The glass in Harry's hand shatters. Dudley stares at it, worried for a second, and then grins.

"Wait until I tell Dad."

I could kill him for you. It would be so easy, Harry. Let me teach you how to kill.

Harry turns and walks away, seeping himself with the Not-Caring (*I do not care, I do not care, I don't*) before he can answer either Dudley or the madman in his head. He breathes deeply when he reaches the French doors, breathing in the warm summer air and out frigid mist. *I do not care about any of this. None of it. Not at all.*

"Harry?" Hermione frowns at him. "Are you alright?"

"Sure," Harry says flatly. Hermione looks at him quizzically but Harry looks away. He stares at the garden fence and hears Dudley's words: *You're not a survivor. You let me do it.*

I do not care, Harry thinks fiercely, not caring that his fingertips are starting to go numb. *I do not fucking care at all.*

Chapter End Notes

Note about Surviving Abuse:

I understand that people might be frustrated with the way that Harry responds to his abusers and it is totally normal to feel frustration towards a character you are invested in. However, I please ask that you do not make comments that veer towards victim blaming or judging Harry for his trauma response. It is very normal for a teenager to return to his learned behaviours when replaced into a situation or environment that mimics the conditions of his abuse. It does not mean the child hasn't made progress or learned valuable lessons, it means that trauma responses take a long time to unlearn. Please be aware that there are likely others reading this work and the comments who have been in similar situations and experienced these feelings, so let's create a culture where they do not hear blame or judgement. We don't victim-blame in this space. If you, like Harry, find yourself put in situations where you have to face someone who traumatised you as a child, I just want you to know that we see you. We see your survival. You are a true Prince.

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

A Consort in Privet Drive

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/child abuse).

This time, Theo goes to Privet Drive.

Next time, Theo and Harry have it out. FINALLY.

If you're waiting for the Privet Drive tension to be over, the last update of the Privet Drive chapters will be Friday. These last three chapters are big ones (over 10K each) so buckle up.

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

"I cannot believe Potter," Draco says.

Theo rolls his eyes.

"I do believe he is actually real and not fiction, Draco," Theo jokes lightly, catching Astoria's eye as she smirks behind her book. Theo has been feeling better since his chat with Blaise on Sunday night. Blaise dragged him out of the study, shoved him in the shower and had even laid out dinner clothes for him on his bed when he came back into the room, towelling his hair. Then Blaise took him to dinner and laughed with Daphne and teased Astoria and Theo had found himself reluctantly smiling and then, before he knew it, pulled into a debate with Daphne about whether blood runes should be illegal. When he laid his head down to sleep that night, Blaise's voice was in his head: *Apollonius took a lot away from you. Don't let your true identity be one of them.* As he drifted off to sleep, he reflected upon Lovegood's quiet certainty about him. *Learn. Scheme. Defend. Sorcerer.*

Theo doesn't know what it means but he knows it means something. There is a fire alight inside of him now. He returned to his studies yesterday with a vigour that wasn't there before. It might have been the fourteen hours of sleep and the good food and the shower or it might have been Blaise's calm affirmations inside his mind (*If anyone can get Potter-Black sorted out, it's you, Nott*) but Theo does not feel useless today, for the first time in what feels like a very long time. After a day of research and writing the precis of what might one day be an academic paper on the ancient Mages, Theo had been looking forward to a quiet Tuesday evening. He had planned to assist Astoria with her Potions homework and then relax by going through the textbook for the sixth year Runes class with Daphne. Unfortunately, it has been completely derailed by the unexpected presence of Draco. Lord and Lady Malfoy are having dinner downstairs with Lord and Lady Greengrass and Theo can't exactly fault them for not wanting Draco's company. Unfortunately, it means Theo and Daphne and Astoria have to endure it. Their own, less formal dinner in the upstairs drawing room has been dreadful. For some reason, Draco seems to think he needs to impress Astoria. Luckily, Astoria may be meek but she seems to have good taste. She has retreated into a book after dinner, completely ignoring Draco's very long and boring Quidditch stories. Daphne is painting her nails

and Theo is trying to read a letter from Granger about the complexity of Harry being Lord Black. The fact that they are all pointedly ignoring Draco has not stopped him from blathering on.

“No, I mean I can’t believe what he has *done* , obviously,” Draco says, rolling his blue eyes.

"What has the Black Lord apparent done to irritate you today?" Daphne asks, staring at her nails. "Did he gain another title that you sought to claim?"

“If Harry Potter-Black had another title he’d be the third three times heir in the history of the Wizengamot,” Astoria says, her soft brown eyes flickering with interest. “I read about it in *Witch Weekly*. ”

Theo tries not to smile as Draco frowns. Like many of the younger years, Astoria follows the news of the youngest named Lord apparent to two Noble Houses with interest.

“It’s a fucking accident of birth that he’s going to be Lord Black,” Draco sneers.

“Surely it is an accident of birth that anyone is Lord Black,” Theo muses. Draco sneers. Astoria hides her giggle behind her book. Since Theo apologised for his harsh words two weeks ago by offering her potions tutelage, she has been a lot more relaxed around him.

“What did he do?” Daphne presses, her tone bored.

"He instigated a protection over underage wixen in his house," Draco says, irritably. Daphne stops painting her nails.

"He did what?" Theo asks quietly. Daphne looks at him covertly. They both know there are only two options that would involve this kind of protection: an Heir clause or a Sanctuary clause. Both seem impossible since Harry would never name Draco as his Heir and Draco would never ask Harry for Sanctuary. *So how did it happen?*

"Isn't it ridiculous? He's so frightened of me, of what I'm capable of, that he feels the need to make sure that I can't threaten him," Draco sneers. Theo tries not to throw a nearby copy of *Hogwarts: A History* at Draco's head. There is not a world in which Harry is threatened by Draco.

"He has named you an Heir?" Daphne asks.

"No," Draco flushes angrily. "No, he's just initiated a Sanctuary clause."

Daphne and Theo glance at one another. Theo imagines they are both remembering the same passage from *Family Magic - Protections, Shunnings, inheritances and bondings*. Sanctuary clauses cannot be initiated by the Lord, that would be tantamount to kidnap. Even Astoria is looking at Draco as if he has the same mental capacity as her pygmy puff.

"But you have to ask for Sanctuary," Daphne says, speaking slowly, as if to a child.

"You wouldn't get it," Draco scorns, making one of Lady Greengrasses Fabergé eggs float in the air with a flick of his wand. Daphne watches it like a cat. Draco clearly does not care that they are priceless. "He did some Lordship thing."

“What did it look like?” Theo says quickly.

Theo thinks of Skye, of the way Harry's power tunnelled through the earth and left him trembling and marked. *Sweet Odin, what the fuck have Snape and Lupin let him do to himself?*

"I ... it looked like -," Draco seems to be struggling to speak, he's actually squirming in his seat. "It looked like a Sanctuary Clause!"

Daphne and Theo look at one another. There is something odd there, they just can't work out what it is.

"It was a normal Sanctuary Clause, he - he commanded my mother and I be present," Draco finishes, sullenly.

Daphne rolls her eyes, shaking her head softly. Draco can be capable of rudimentary cunning and when he applies himself academically can easily excel, but he is not a swift thinker. They all know it isn't possible for Harry to simply enact a Sanctuary clause without consent.

"It's impossible," Astoria pipes up, looking at Draco like he's mad. "You have to consent."

"Not if the Lord is as powerful as Potter," Draco mutters, scowling down at the egg in his hands like he would enjoy crushing it. Daphne shoots Theo a sharp look and he knows what it means: *is Harry powerful enough to do this?* Theo looks away because he honestly does not know.

"What did it look like?" Theo repeats.

"What does it matter?" Draco sniffs. "It was all some trick of Bane's, no doubt. Father always says he is utterly tasteless with his gaudy magic, like all daemons. They are mere tricksters when compared to true Wixen."

"Yes, and I'm sure it was someone else who authored the seminal work, *Portal travel and the untapped mysteries of leylines*, frequently cited by Wixen scholars worldwide," Daphne mutters.

"It matters because I am interested," Theo says as lightly as he can bear to. "Magical bindings might be part of my Mastery."

"Well, then you should make Potter your prime subject," Draco mumbles. Theo sees something in Draco's eyes that gives him pause. Fear. *Why does Draco fear Harry?*

"Why?" Theo presses but Draco squirms, *again*, like he does when he gets too close to the house snakes, almost like it is an uncontrollable reflex. Daphne is staring at him too, her eyebrows furrowed. Then she writes a word on a piece of paper in nail varnish and pushes it across the table. Draco is too focused on Astoria to notice.

"Enough about Potter. Which team do you support?" he asks, leaning towards Astoria.

"Who cares?" Astoria mutters and Draco splutters, giving Theo time to grab the piece of paper and read the word written in a muted grey, like silver leaf on the parchment: *compulsion*? Theo stares at it, the library inside his mind suddenly feeling very empty. Lovegood's words come back to him. He knows what he has to do. *When I can't scheme or defend, I must learn.*

"Excuse me," Theo says, rising.

"Bed so soon, Nott?" Draco asks.

“I have a study project that needs my attention,” Theo says sharply, leaving Draco’s comments about all work and no play behind him as he strides quickly back towards the library and his pile of research. In the last three days, the house elves have realised that his stack of books and endless notebooks should not be touched. So he is shocked when he enters the usually empty, cold room and sees Narcissa Malfoy standing over his desk, one hand resting on his open runes notebook. He’s grateful he translated his musings on Harry being a Mage and what it might mean into Ancient Pict. She doesn’t look up but lifts her wand. Theo pulls out his own wand quickly, but she only shuts the door behind him and he sees a tingle of magic around the door. He knows they won’t be overheard.

“Your assertion that Mages existed prior to Merlin is interesting,” Narcissa muses, not taking her blue eyes off the page. “If a little thin on evidence.”

“You read Ancient Pict,” Theo says flatly.

“I am a Runes Master,” Narcissa straightens up and looks at Theo solemnly. He knew that but he also knows that a standard Runes Master is not fluent in every rune alphabet. Except for Narcissa Black, apparently.

“You said you would be in communication with me,” he says. “Is that what is happening?”

“I would say so,” Narcissa says quietly. She is shockingly beautiful today, even Theo can see that, in a dark green, high-necked dress of satin and lace and robes of softest silver. He imagines the overall effect is intended to make her appear beguiling and pleasant, but Theo thinks it is like watching a snow leopard stalk through the mountains. The beauty of it does not make it less dangerous. “My son, I presume, told you of the Sanctuary clause.”

Theo sees no reason to lie but he grips his journal tight. All he wants to do is sit and write in it, ask Harry what in the fucking hell is going on and is it possible that he somehow accidentally compelled Malfoy, and *what the fuck was he thinking?* but he can’t, not right now.

“He says Harry did it,” Theo says quietly. “He can’t have.”

He knows that’s a lie, even as he says it. Truthfully, nobody knows what Harry can or can’t do. *Least of all Harry.*

“Could he not?” Narcissa holds up a book that Theo had pulled from the Greengrass archives: *Darkest Lords and their liege-bonds*. “Perhaps you under-estimate him.”

“Why are you talking to me about this?” Theo asks abruptly, because whilst he will just about stand to listen to Blaise telling him about Harry he will not stand to listen to the musings of Lady Malfoy. Narcissa looks at him slowly for a moment and then flicks the book open.

“The bond that you and Harry share is unusual. I do not speculate on it for I am sure it would be fruitless but I would be lying if I said it does not give me pause,” she muses quietly. “Recent events force me, as your legal guardian, to ask a question.”

“Then ask it,” Theo says coldly. “I might not answer.”

“Very well.” Narcissa’s piercing blue eyes rest on his face. “Has Harry ever compelled you?”

“What? No, of course he fucking hasn’t!” Theo stares at her, aware of how his loud voice bounces around the bookshelves, but he is suddenly completely uncaring. “He loves me! Why would you even think that?”

Even as he says it, he remembers lying in the grass at Fabiola’s Cottage last summer. *Don’t choose me, Theo*. He remembers the light ripples of Harry’s magic, the feeling that he sometimes gets that if Harry really wanted to, he could make anyone do anything, just with his voice.

“Why indeed?” Narcissa murmurs. She stares at him for a long moment and then reaches into her robes, withdrawing a newspaper. She unfolds it and places it on the desk. Reluctantly, Theo approaches it. He stares down at the picture of Harry and Dumbledore shaking hands in the Forum. The title of the article, in Italian, reads: *NECROMANCER: The Next Great Wizard of the Age? Or the Next Dark Lord?* Theo watches the picture move, watches the magic spill out from Harry’s hand and then Dumbledore’s. Theo’s first thought is: *Holy shit, he bound Dumbledore*. Theo’s second thought is: *Holy shit, he bound Dumbledore and he didn’t tell me*. It’s strange, he thinks, to have answers he has craved for the last seventy-two hours. It’s strange how much relief there is in it but also how, like a virus, the question only spawns more of itself. *Why didn’t he tell me? Why would he hide this? Is he ashamed?*

“He did not tell you,” Narcissa doesn’t say it as a question, only as a fact. Theo sees no need to speak. “My husband is working hard to stop these stories leaking into the British press and the Contessa is no doubt working equally as hard to quash them at the source. Neither wish to see a cult arise, if for different reasons.”

Malfoy doesn’t want the competition for the Dark Lord and the Contessa promised to protect Harry, Theo sees the reasons behind their plans but he doesn’t understand the reasons behind Narcissa’s.

“Why are you telling me?” Theo whispers. He looks up at Narcissa, who stares back down at him.

“Do you know the motto of the House of Malfoy?” She asks.

“Yes. *Sanctimony Vincet Semper*,” Theo says, leaving out that every Slytherin in their year is keenly aware of the motto of the House of Malfoy. As if Draco would ever let them forget it. “Purity will always conquer.”

“And what is purity, if not family?” Narcissa says quietly. Theo stares at her perfect face, her white blonde hair pulled back from it making her blue eyes even more stark and unworldly. *Family. She always works for her family*. Then, like pieces of a puzzle falling into place to make an ugly image, Theo understands.

“He compelled Draco,” Theo whispers. “He didn’t enact the Sanctuary clause, Draco’s still underage, *you* enacted it on behalf of your son and Harry was forced to -,”

“I do not believe Harry was forced to do anything,” Narcissa says softly.

“Harry doesn’t *compel* people without cause,” Theo snaps. He might not know what’s going on in Harry’s head but this he knows for sure. Narcissa doesn’t answer, merely refolds the paper and puts it back into her robes. When she is finished, she looks up at him with blue eyes that are slightly misty, as if smoke is drifting across them. Theo doesn’t know if it is magic or a trick of the light.

“It is important, I believe, for you to know the person you risk your life for,” she says quietly.

“I know Harry,” Theo snaps.

“Are you certain?” Narcissa folds her hands in front of her. “Where is he?”

Theo swallows hard and scowls. He hates that he doesn’t know.

“Do you know?” He asks, turning the question around on her. Narcissa inclines her head gently.

“It is important, Son of War, to know for whom you fight,” she says softly. “If he hides himself from you, how can you truly know him?”

Theo tries not to flinch at the official title of Nott warriors, a title that has not been used in public for generations. Still, it was how Apollonius tried to motivate him when he was training. *Faster, Son of War, who can you save with such meagre thrusts of the blade?*

“Will you tell me where he is?” Theo says, ignoring Narcissa’s words. One more answer he has craved and it is so close to him. He wishes he was a legilimens like Snape and could pluck it out of her head rather than beg for it. “Please?”

“I can tell you where he was,” Narcissa’s words are cold and dangerous and suddenly, Theo understands that wherever Harry is now, Narcissa does not approve of him being there. “I hear through sources he has moved on.”

Sources. *Death Eaters*. Theo squares his shoulders.

“Where was he?” Theo demands.

“The last I saw him he was in the home of his father,” Narcissa says. “That was on Sunday. He moved on elsewhere today.”

Theo stiffens. He doesn't want to believe it, he doesn't want to think that Harry has actually been here in England since he left Rome, sleeping in their bed at Spinners End and not telling Theo about it, but his mind is putting the answers together in neat succession and there is one big question still unanswered: *what did Harry bind Dumbledore for?*

“He sent you away, didn’t he?” Narcissa steps closer. “From Rome? I heard rumour another young man was with him, a friend of the Zabini heir perhaps.”

Theo doesn’t speak. He prays to Odin he wasn’t recognisable.

“Do not fret, it was a well-made glamour,” Narcissa whispers. Theo allows himself to breathe. “It is only that I expected to find you there that I saw you. But he sent you away, did he not?”

“What’s it to you?” Theo asks roughly. No matter how many times Blaise tells him that he would have whisked Theo away without Harry asking, it doesn’t make the fact that Harry felt the need to do it any better.

Narcissa nods solemnly.

“Protection is only true protection if it is consensual, Theodore,” she says, her eyes more misty and smoky than before. Theo wonders suddenly, with a jolt of his heart, if it’s the imperius curse but then old legends drop into his memory. *Seers eyes change*. His mother taught him this as she threw rune stones on the cold mornings, the sound of the ocean around Nott Castle in Ireland rushing in

his ears. *Holy Odin, is Narcissa Malfoy a Seer?* Theo tries to ignore the way her voice makes every hair on his body stand on end. “If he veils himself from you then neither of you are safe and you will never be a Consort. He will never be himself and you shall never be yourself.”

You need to be a consort, Theo, Blaise’s words echo inside his head and Theo has a strange sense of premonition as Lovegood’s word repeats around his head: *Sorcerer. Sorcerer. Sorcerer.*

“Why do you care?” Theo croaks. Her misty eyes rest on his face and slowly, the blue returns to them. Theo feels as if he can breathe easier again.

“Because I have sworn to keep you both safe,” she says simply. She reaches into her sleeve and withdraws a book. Theo looks down at the title. *Mind magics and Mind mediums.*

“I’ve read this,” he says.

“No, you have not,” Narcissa whispers. She taps the cover of the book with her wand with a whispered revealing spell. The cover underneath is totally different, a dark blue cover that is stained and frayed, as if it has been carried down generations. The script on the front is in Middle English: *Magik of the Mynd and holy squier agaynst enemyes.* “You understand?”

“Magic of the mind and holy squires against enemies,” Theo strokes the faded paint on the words. “I’ve not seen it before.”

“It has been in my family since the time of Chaucer. It was written, I believe, by someone in the House of Black, or perhaps some bastard son somewhere.” Narcissa says quietly. Theo stares at the priceless relic in his hand and doesn’t know what to say.

“Why are you giving it to me?” Theo whispers.

“He fears for your mind, does he not? Your bonded?” Narcissa taps a fingernail against the cover. “This will teach you to defend your mind from the likes of the Headmaster. Or others.”

The Dark Lord.

Theo looks at the book. He remembers Blaise’s words since almost every moment of their conversation seems to be eternally rattling around his mind. Still, it is probably better than having Apollonius’ voice in the back of his head every second of the day. He remembers Blaise’s intuition: *As you must learn to be a consort he must learn to be a Lord.* He stares at the literal piece of history in his hands. Something that Narcissa Black has handed over so easily to him, without warning or threat, just to help him learn. He feels like every word in every language he has ever learned is lost to him entirely.

“Books,” Theo blurts out, staring at the ancient manuscript in his hands. “On ... being a consort.”

“I have them,” Narcissa says quietly above him.

“I ...” Theo cannot look at her and speak but Blaise’s blood-red eyes are inside his mind. *Trust us.* He knows Blaise would never have expected Narcissa to be on the list of people Theo could ever trust but Theo doesn’t care what anyone expects. She is here. She is his guardian, supposedly, and most importantly, she has the books. So Theo says the true thing. “I must learn.”

“I will send them.”

The answer is so quick, so without guile or expectation, that Theo can't help but jerk his head up to look into her eyes as if expecting to find some kind of sneer there but there is none. Her eyes are as blue as sea glass and without cruelty. He believes she will send the books.

"I ... would appreciate it," Theo croaks out. He cannot say thank you, the words are too heavy on his tongue but it seems to be enough for her. Narcissa nods and then turns and walks to the door. She pauses, her hand on the gilded door knob.

"The pain he is in ..." her blonde, silvery eyebrows furrow as she stares down at her hand. "It is too much for one child to bear alone." She looks up at Theo significantly, eyes piercing. "Or two children."

It's on the tip of Theo's tongue to retort back: *we are not children!* But there's something about Narcissa's eyes that stops him. He remembers her stories in his mother's room at Nott castle and the children she lost. He remembers Blaise's voice again. *Trust us.* Theo swallows hard. He can't speak but he nods. Narcissa offers him a faint, wintry smile.

"Remember all I have said," she commands. "Tell my Lord that whilst power is worth nothing if it does not defend, it is worth even less if there is no one to defend."

Theo doesn't understand but he nods and waits for her to leave. When he hears her receding footsteps he lets himself breathe, the air coming in heavy gasps as he scrambles to open his journal, grabbing up his biro, scrawling words in it, waiting desperately for a response.

I know you were at Spinners End. Why didn't you tell me?

I wasn't allowed. Only the people living there knew.

It seems reasonable but it doesn't feel reasonable. Theo sets the pen to the paper again with a shaking hand.

Where are you now?

I can't tell you. But I'm safe.

Why can't you tell me?

Harry doesn't respond. Theo feels rage and despair building up and doesn't know what to do. *What can I do? What can I do?* Then, like a *lumos* inside his mind, he remembers.

"Kreacher!" Theo calls. He's relieved when, with a crack, Kreacher appears.

"Heir Nott calls?" Kreacher asks, looking around.

"Take me to him," Theo says. He's trembling from head to toe. He will not let Harry push him away and keep secrets. Not anymore. *He needs a consort*. Theo doesn't know how to be one, not yet, but Theo will fucking *learn* and he's going to start now and he won't let anyone stop him.

"I cannot," Kreacher snarls. He's not alone. He's holding Sahara. "Heir Nott must look after Master's familiar."

"She's not his familiar, we have a timeshare," Theo says automatically. He takes Sahara onto his arm and looks down at her scales. She's glittering, brighter than she was when they first met. "Why does he need me to take care of her? Where is he?"

Kreacher stares at Theo and rolls his eyes.

"Heir Nott must use his brain," Kreacher says quietly. "Where does Master go in the summer? Where can he not take animals and Kreacher must not be seen?"

Theo's heart stops.

Safe, Harry had said. This is the opposite of safe. Theo wonders if Harry has actually done it, if he's found a lie that Theo is not sure he can forgive, because Theo already rescued Harry from this. They both escaped muggle hell in a car with an elf and Theo swore to himself that whilst he would never kill the Dursleys if that's what Harry needed him to say, he would never let Harry be subject to their abuses again.

"Why has he gone back? Why would he -?" Theo whispers, his mind racing through the tidbits of information Harry has shared discordantly over the last week, but the answer is there, as plain as the photograph on the front page of the Italian newspaper that Narcissa showed him. "Dumbledore."

This is why he bound Dumbledore.

"Yes," Kreacher croaks.

"He bound Dumbledore, it looked like a vow, what would Harry get out of going back to the -?" Theo thinks about the will reading that Harry told him about, miserable at the loss of Black and the missed opportunity of Magnus Bane. He's mentioned Bane's return to Theo at least, so he knows Bane is with him. The answers slot into Theo's mind like dominos. "The Black Stewardship, Harry traded -?"

"Yes," Kreacher nods.

"And they just let him -?" Theo knows that as much as he fucking loathes Severus Snape right now for being there with Harry whilst Theo isn't, there is no way on Freyja's green earth Snape would let Harry do this, not the wolf either. Literally everyone Theo knows who knows about the Dursleys would let Dumbledore bend them over a barrel before they let Harry go back there.

All except one person.

Knowledge fills him with coldness, just like it did the night Harry's glamour fell at Grimmauld Place. There's a peace in it, a type of calm in this sensation of seeing the truth finally for what it is and absolutely wanting to murder someone for it. *Harry*, Theo thinks. *This has Harry-fucking-Potter written all over it.*

"He traded," Theo whispers, feeling outrage creeping up in his body, magic and fear and despair and a little bit of hatred that he can't deny. *Potter, you fucking reckless, noble idiot.* "Harry did it anyway, he was alone with Dumbledore, he was alone with Dumbledore because he *sent me away* and he traded and bound him and Dumbledore to it before anyone could even-,"

"Yes." Kreacher looks as angry as Theo feels. "Master traded. Now Master must go there and Mr Bane must be the steward and no one can stop them."

"FUCK!" Theo screams.

For the second time since he met Harry Potter, Theo's accidental magic erupts and throws his journal across the library. It hits a precariously stacked pile of books and they tumble like an avalanche. Kreacher doesn't move, just looks at him a little pityingly. Theo cannot bear this feeling, something between betrayal and torture. All he can think of is sneaking back into Privet Drive last summer, climbing the stairs and hearing Kreacher's muttering breath. All he can see behind his eyes is, strangely, Apollonius' last breath leaving his body. He remembers how it felt to hold Harry in his shitty bedroom, covered in blood, and think that he was going watch Harry Potter, the kindest boy he knew, bleed out in his arms. *No. Never again.* Theo breathes heavily and looks at Kreacher.

"Take me to him."

"Kreacher cannot."

"Kreacher will," Theo snarls. "They've let him go back there, the fucking *morons*, but they weren't there, they didn't see the blood and he won't have told them -,"

"Kreacher knows, Kreacher was there," Kreacher snaps, and Theo cannot contain his despair.

"THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP HIM?" Theo bellows. The door to the library opens.

"Theodore," Daphne steps into the room and casts a spell over the door as she closes it. She does not even seem surprised to see Kreacher. "The noise."

Kreacher doesn't even flinch at either Theo's yelling or Daphne's rebuke. He simply glares at Theo angrily.

"Heir Nott knows why Kreacher could not," he snaps. "Master decided."

"Master is a fucking idiot!" Theo explodes.

"But he is Master," Kreacher growls.

"Master was nearly killed by that *motherfucking ape*, he would be DEAD right now if not for -,"

"Kreacher, dead if not for Kreacher!" Kreacher interrupts, glaring at Theo. "Kreacher will always protect Master and Heir Nott but Master makes his own choices, and if Heir Nott wants different ones then Heir Nott must talk to Master!"

"Don't worry, I fucking will!" Theo snarls back. "This is enough, this is fucking *enough!*"

Kreacher grins suddenly as if these were the words he had been waiting for.

"Good," he says quietly. "That is what Master needs. Master tries to protect him but Master needs Heir Nott back."

Theo stares at Kreacher. Harry is doing exactly what Narcissa said he would do, what she warned Theo against at Nott Castle. *Has he ever given indication that he might keep things of importance from you under the guise of protecting you?* Theo has no doubt that this is exactly what this is, and Theo has had enough.

"Who's there?" Theo asks abruptly. "Who's with him?"

"Masters Potter sister and Masters guardsmen and many, many goblin protections," Kreacher says. "Heir Nott must not be seen. The Dark Lord has watchers. The Ministry watches too."

Theo's stomach turns at the notion that Granger and the Weasley Twins and goblin protections are enough to ensure Harry's wellbeing in that dump. They don't know what it was like. They abandoned him, so none of them knows exactly who Harry Potter was twelve months ago. They don't know how cold Harry was at first, how uncaring, how little concern he had for himself. They don't know that something inside that muggle hellhole makes Harry think he's a monster, that he deserves to be beaten. *They don't know because they've never had someone turn them into a monster, day after day.* But Theo knows. He remembers the burns on his arms and the cut through Harry's eyebrow. *Nobody knows what that place does to Harry. Nobody but me.*

"Don't worry, I won't be seen." Theo retrieves his journal and doesn't even look at it. He tells himself he will not say another word to Harry on paper until he has spoken to him face to face.

"Heir Nott still has Master's inheritance," Kreacher reminds him quietly. *The invisibility cloak.* Theo nods.

"I'll use it."

The invisibility cloak has been hidden in a secret compartment of his trunk since they came back from the Department of Mysteries. It will be helpful in sneaking onto Privet Drive without Death Eaters of the Order of Utter Incompetents noticing him. Theo glances at the elf and holds his yellow gaze. Sometimes, it feels like only Kreacher really knows or understands what he and Harry have. Maybe it's because no one else was there, that night in muggle hell. Nobody else saw the blood and felt the life draining out of Harry's body.

"Go well," Kreacher croaks and pops away. Sahara slithers up the pile of tumbled books. She hisses something that sounds like " *Greenheart ... hostile nest ...* ".

"I know, I'm on my way," Theo mutters, gathering books he might want and his lists and workbooks. He looks at Daphne. "Can you feed Sahara? It's probably best if she stays here with you."

"Where are you going?" Daphne asks. Her eyes are oddly focused.

"Surrey," Theo grabs the book Narcissa gave him and drops them into his school satchel which is hanging on a hook by the library fire. "I'll get the muggle train."

"There won't be one until morning," Daphne casually looks at her watch. "It is eleven o'clock at night."

"Then I'll get the Knight Bus," Theo snaps, even though he knows that is much riskier. On muggle transport, he won't meet any hostile Wixen. On the Knight bus, everyone in London will know that Theodore Nott is travelling south.

"I don't think so," Daphne says gently. She lifts her hand with her Greengrass ring on it. "*Berhenti.*"

It seems that Daphne has been practising wielding the Greengrass magic because green light rises up around Theo like a cloud. He feels as if he is being cushioned on all sides, struggling against air but unable to move. It's not like Blaise's magic, Theo realises, which is confronting and made for combat, designed to control. This, Theo considers, feels more like what he imagines being hugged by a bear might feel like. *Subduing, not defeating.*

"Let me go," Theo says, looking at the glow of the pearl in her Heir ring, a greenish glitter on the stone from the Java Sea. He feels vaguely impressed. He has never seen Daphne wield the Greengrass magic.

"Either stay still or I shall call your consort shield and have him come and sit on you," Daphne says sternly.

"He'd let me go," Theo wriggles against the bonds, his resentment at the whole situation bubbling up. Daphne looks at him as if he is simple.

"The Dark Lords' servants watch Harry wherever he is and yet you want to charge in there? You want the whole of Wixen London to know Theodore Nott is travelling to Surrey?" Daphne raises her eyebrows. "Even you can surely see the lack of wisdom in that plan."

"I'll use a glamour," Theo snaps.

"And so a *stranger* will turn up on Harry's doorstep and that will be less suspicious to the Dark Lord, the Ministry of Magic and Dumbledore's people?" Daphne glares. "Do better, Theodore."

"Blaise told me to be a consort," Theo snaps. "Well, if being a consort means protecting Harry from his own shitty decisions then that is what I'm going to do and I don't really give a *fuck* what you think."

It is the type of insolent response that Harry gives, the type that Daphne despises with every part of her being and Theo sees the way that her eyes narrow and the air around him presses against his arms and legs a little tighter.

"I appreciate your lack of care with your own life comes from a place of grief and frustration," Daphne steps closer to him, her voice tautly polite and level, "and I am truly sorry for what you have lost but we are your *Alleanza*, as much as Granger and Weasley are Harry's. You are attached to a powerful being now, Theodore, and our fortunes rise and fall with yours and I have too much at stake for you to get yourself murdered by Death Eaters."

"Do you think I give a shit about any of that when he's *back there*? " *He nearly died, he as good as died there and he's gone back.*

"Really? Are you completely without the capacity for rational thought?" Daphne demands and despite her accuracy, the words sting because, for Theo, rationality doesn't come into it. Harry is at Privet Drive. Harry nearly died there with no one to save him. Theo saved him. He needs Theo. It is

too simple for words. "I am not saying do not go, I am only saying think rationally about it! I am saying go with me, trust me -,"

"And I am saying I need to go now!" Theo roars. "I am saying it's not your business! I am saying staying out of it!"

He can't stop it, it is like there is an animal sitting on his chest, chasing away his breath. *He's at the Dursleys. They tried to kill him.* Any minute Harry spends in that house without Theo is a minute too long. He knows he's on the verge of panic, he knows maybe he's crossed into madness, but he doesn't care.

"And I am saying *think* ," Daphne hisses. "Think but for a moment! Analyse the situation and forge a less reckless path forward that we can take -,"

"You're not coming with me," Theo says, struggling against his bonds. "Absolutely not."

Daphne's eyes flash with something primitive and sharp and she stands a little taller, her back pressed against the library door.

"Blaise has vowed to protect your life," she says quietly. "He almost died once. I will not let make light of his sacrifice by throwing yourself headlong into dangerous situations simply because you're too enamoured with Harry to notice the risk."

"He is warming Weasleys bed, why do you care?"

Immediately, Theo feels his mistake. Daphne's face goes casually but noticeably blank and Theo knows, deep in his gut, that even taking into account the bitter haze of anxiety clouding his mind right now, he has fucked up.

"I will not be judged by *you* for who I choose to love and protect. I do not for a moment judge whatever unorthodox and foolish magical connection you have with Harry or the intense pain it gives you at being stretched apart, that is *your* foolishness to bear and if you cannot bear the intimacy of such a bond then you should not have taken it!" Daphne's voice is dangerous. Her hand holding her Heir magic in place trembles. He wonders if she is struggling to maintain it, or fighting to stop it from crushing the oxygen out of him. Unlike Blaise, when Daphne is furious, she shows it. Theo wants to cringe in the face of her verbal assault but he knows it would be practically suicide, like showing his underbelly to a ravenous bear. "Despite all of that, I do *not* judge you. The very least you could do is extend the same courtesy to me and even if you will not, I will stand in the gaps of your cruelty, Theodore. I *will* shield Blaise."

Theo's heart is racing brutally.

"Blaise is my consort-shield," he blurts out. "You cannot vow to shield him. By the property of transference, you will shield me too. You must not do that, you *cannot* do that."

"You think I cannot do it?" Daphne raises his eyebrows and raises her other hand with her wand in it. She whispers a few words and the room is alight with numbers, sequencing and dancing in the air. Theo takes a sudden breath. It is practical arithmancy as Theo has only seen performed by very skilled NEWT level students or by Professor Vector but then this always has been an area of study in which Daphne has excelled. The numbers settle on the ground around her and burst into a swirling, numeric shield. Daphne's eyes blaze with triumph. "I may not be a warrior, Theodore Nott, or be whatever magically overcharged madness your boyfriend is -,"

“Not my boyfriend,” Theo mutters, automatically.

“*Lord*, then,” Daphne tightens the hold around him, her wand holding her shield steady at the same time and her voice is laced with scorn, “but if you think I cannot shield what I choose to shield, for unlike some I do not need a *vow* to keep me honest, then you are sorely mistaken.”

“Daphne,” Theo swallows hard, his heart pounding in his ears. Being scolded by Daphne has always been like being set aflame in public. “I didn’t mean that you weren’t capable I mean ... you *can’t* do this for ... ”

For me, he thinks wildly. Blaise’s voice pops into his head again: *I’m here for you. So is Daphne.*

“Just because you are so shrouded in teenage infatuation you can only seem to think of your boyfriend - sorry, *Lord*, ” Daphne rolls her eyes, her voice as hard as diamonds, “does not mean all of us are incapable of keeping our word. I will not abandon words given in friendship. I shield Blaise not because he is my love but because he is as much a part of me as Tori is, as you are, despite your *utter* lack of decorum. Do not dare to tell me I shall not shield those who are precious to me, as if you, because you are a *man* and you are bonded to a Necromancer, are the only one who can fight for those he loves. My words, my vows, my commitments are *just* as valuable as yours.”

“I did not mean -,” Theo says weakly. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Like Blaise was hurt. For me.

“Then do not be an idiot,” Daphne says sharply. “We will go, consort, but we will go safely or I swear, you shall never leave this room.”

Daphne’s brown eyes are full of fury and the numbers floating around them alight with gold. When they brush against Theo’s shirt, they feel zap and burn down to his skin. He spares a moment of admiration for his friend, his incredibly smart and powerful friend. *Thank Hel she is on my side.*

“I ...,” Theo struggles for words. His heart is screaming that Harry comes first, that Harry must always, *always* come first and he will run into any danger, he will fight any fight and everyone else can burn for all he cares. Then he looks at Daphne. The friend took a vow with Harry to keep Theo’s secrets. His friend who found him the glamour book and spent endless days helping him perfect it, put up with his never-ending planning of the second date and has quietly and stalwartly made sure he is fed and watered despite his attempts to study and read through all of his biological urges. *Alleanza*. Theo feels irrational tears starting in the corner of his eyes and he squeezes them tightly shut, trying to breathe through the clenching of the bond in his chest. *Think but for a moment*. When Thoe does, when he takes a shuddering breath and thinks, he knows what he has to do.

“I apologise,” Theo swallows hard and fights his urge to look shamefully at his shoes. Apollonius’ words float back to him on a memory, for the first time since his death, not a horrible rebuke or reminder of harsh teachings: *where apologies must be given, warriors give them eye to eye and soul to soul*. So Theo stares into Daphne’s brown eyes. “For being an idiot and saying ... what I said about Weasley. You are right I must ... scheme first if I am to defend later. I offer no excuse. I ask your forgiveness.”

He stares at her for a long moment. Daphne is not a person who endures long, drawn-out apologies or excuses or even explanations. Yet if Daphne does not forgive him and takes his comment back to

Blaise, he knows he will lose both of them. *If our friendship withstands your attempts to ruin it ...* Blaise could happily endure Theo verbally berating him and spitting vile for hours but if it is revealed he has hurt Daphne with his words, Theo knows Blaise will not withstand it.

Daphne sighs as if she's watching his progression of thoughts.

"*Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none,*" Daphne says. "Harry's bard said it. I hold no stock in loving all and doing no wrong since I do not have enough love for all and wrong is highly subjective, but *trust a few* seems logical to my mind. *A few*, Theodore. Not all."

"Who are your few?" Theo asks, his mouth dry.

"Blaise," Daphne says automatically. "George Weasley. You, as long as you do not continue to pull away from us."

Theo stares. He thought he was the only one with such a short list of confidantes. Apparently, Daphne trusts as rarely as he does.

"Not your father? Your sister?"

Daphne smiles wryly.

"We carry such secrets now, do we not?" She says quietly. "There are things they cannot know. I love them but there is a limit to my trust in them now, as there was not before."

Theo wonders how it feels for Daphne to carry his secrets. To carry Harry's. To keep them from her family whom he knows she is utterly devoted to. *I am not the only one entirely changed by Harry.* He swallows hard and quirks a small smile towards her.

"George Weasley?" He raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

Daphne shrugs.

"He is my friend," she says simply. "So are you. So tell me, Theodore, will you trust me as one of your few?"

Theo stares at his friend. He doesn't know if he has even a centimetre of trust left in him, especially not today, but he knows he must try. *Trust a few: Harry. Blaise. Daphne.* Perhaps in the future, he will trust Narcissa if she keeps her promise to send him books but he is not sure. Just these few people seem to be the most he can bear but if Daphne survives well enough on such a short list, he can too.

"Very well," Theo nods to her formally, though part of him oddly longs to hug her, as Harry hugs Granger. "I shall accept your trust and return it. I shall trust you to ... help me get to Surrey. Appropriately."

"Then you are forgiven." Daphne lowers her arm and the pressure against Theo's limbs disappears. "If you stop acting like such a ridiculous Gryffindor and use your exceptional mind, rather than let it be overrun by lust and let me help you."

Theo understands the threat. Daphne may have compared Blaise and herself to Granger and Weasley, but they are nowhere near so forgiving. When lessons are not learned and respect is not given, then consequences are enacted. Theo feels foolish for losing control of his tongue. Foolish

and regretful. *I might love Harry but I am still a Nott and she is still a Greengrass.* So he does something he's not done in a very long time. He takes Daphne's hand and bends low over it, kissing her heir ring. It is like hot sand to the touch.

"You are too kind, Heir Greengrass," he murmurs.

"Honestly," Daphne rolls her eye drolly, pulling her hand away. "I do not know how you hold more than one thought in your head with all those hormones racing around."

"It is a struggle," Theo smiles at her tentatively. "I am sorry."

"I know." Daphne smiles at him and looks down at her ring. "I thank you for an opportunity to practise my heir magic."

"It is ... interesting," Theo rubs his arms. "Odd but not ... unpleasant."

"My father used to use it on me as a child," Daphne says lightly.

"To restrain you?" Theo raises his eyebrows. He did not have Lord Greengrass pegged as that kind of father but he does not trust any parent to be kind.

"Of course not," Daphne twists her ring affectionately. "Intense pressure upon the body can be helpful for children struggling with overstimulation. I've been learning it for Tori. She still needs it sometimes."

Theo stares at his friend. Daphne is suave and self-possessed. She is beautiful and aloof. He has never considered that her disinterest in making any friendships beyond him and Blaise could be a signifier of something deeper.

"Does she ... do you ... Is it neuro sensitivity or a kind of neurodiversity like Harry's Attention Deficit -?"

"Do you know how to drive a muggle car?" Daphne asks abruptly, folding her hands in front of her and giving him a small smile. Theo knows he has not earned this secret from her yet. He wonders if Blaise knows and then scorns himself internally. Of course Blaise knows.

"Yes," Theo answers. "Why?"

"Because I know how to get us to Surrey," Daphne smiles.

"Stop fidgeting," Daphne hisses as they walk down Privet Drive to number four. "I can feel that cloak brushing against my legs."

"Apologies," Theo mutters. The invisibility cloak never feels like it fits or covers him as well as Harry. He and Daphne spent a couple of hours planning last night, going over every possible contingency and what could go wrong when simply strolling into what is essentially, according to

Kreacher, at this point a goblin held fort masquerading as a Muggle home surrounded on every side by political and terrorist groups just waiting for someone to cast the first curse. Theo barely slept when they did finally retire and rose early at Daphne's urging. She had led him out onto the quiet street and presented him with a large, comfortable Bentley. Theo was surprised to discover Lord Greengrass owns a car, an enchanted car that controlled its own brake and gears. It made for a much much easier drive out of London than Harry's uncle's car as all Theo had to do was steer and accelerate, just as he had done with Kreacher. Daphne, it turned out, was a much better navigator than a sugar-dependent elf sitting at his ankles. When Theo had suggested Daphne wait in the car when they parked it at the end of the cul-de-sac, she merely pulled her hair back into a ponytail and said: "Have you considered how odd it shall look when you knock on the door invisible? I am the heir to a neutral house with a very powerful father, none of Dumbledore's people nor the Dark Lord's will touch me, unlike you, who shall raise ire from both."

Theo had no response prepared for that and besides, Daphne is the one holding all of the emergency portkeys in her small handbag.

He gives Daphne a sideways glance as they stroll along the cul-de-sac. She is dressed impeccably in a navy blue voile shirt with tiny cap sleeves and silk buttons, and a matching silk mini skirt. He has never noticed before what an extensive muggle wardrobe Daphne has.

"This muggle garb is nice," he says quietly.

"Of course it is, it is Versace," Daphne rolls her eyes and pulls her sunglasses out of her bag. "Don't talk, you're invisible."

"Sorry."

Theo stares at the small walls and neatly clipped hedges and remembers the first time Harry took him by the hand and pulled him, gently and firmly towards the terrible house. He remembers the film (dreaded Star Wars) and the bond, sudden and life-changing, brought about by Harry's recklessness in a moment in his bedroom. *One moment. Only one. Now I will never be the same.*

"Is it that one?" Daphne's asks.

"I thought you told me not to speak."

"Number four?" Daphne stops walking. Theo stares up at the house.

"Yes," Theo says tersely. He stares at the empty driveway and remembers the smell of blood and burnt rubber when they screeched out of Privet Drive last year.

"Hmm, nice begonias," Daphne says.

"Those are Harry's work," Theo mutters.

"Do you recognise that cat?" Daphne gestures to a tabby sitting down at the end of the road.

"Can we get on with it, please?" Theo hisses. He can't stop staring at the door, knowing that Harry is behind it.

"Of course," Daphne mutters, pressing the doorbell.

Theo stares at Harry as he stands in the doorway of number four, Privet Drive. He's wearing a baggy jumper that Theo recognises because it's his, the same old ripped jeans and bare feet, some of the letters from Umbridge's torture visible on the top of his feet. His curly hair is longer, trailing slightly behind his ears and he's wearing what looks like an earring. *Where the fuck did that come from?*

"Greengrass," Harry's eyes slide to Theo, widening slightly. "Theo?"

Theo takes a breath, thinking the invisibility cloak has slipped but then he realises: of course, Harry can smell his magic. There is something awfully comforting about this.

"Can I come in?" Daphne says loudly. "I have a gift from your boyfriend."

"Blaise could have sent an owl," Harry says, presumably for the benefit of watching Death Eaters and Order of the Idiots alike, not wanting to appear as if this was a planned meeting.

"Not for this, besides," Daphne makes a show of taking off her sunglasses and giving a disdainful sniff over the garden, the essence of a prideful pureblood princess on display. No one watching will suspect Daphne has taken a vow to Harry. "I think he was unsure an owl would be appropriately received here."

"Come in," Harry says, nodding shortly. They follow Harry inside. Theo pulls off the cloak and looks around. Harry is standing loosely in the kitchen doorway, staring at him. Theo thinks he sees sparks in Harry's fingertips before he clenches them into fists. "Where's Sahara?"

"My sister, Tori, is watching her, she likes reptiles," Daphne says, glancing around. "This is your house?"

"My relatives," Harry says shortly. He is still staring at Theo but he hasn't moved.

"Where are they?" Theo asks. Harry glances towards the back of the house.

"Vernon's at work. Dudley and Petunia have gone out for the day. The twins are annoying them."

Harry's voice is tense. Theo remembers that voice. It's the same voice from the first day Theo and Harry met in the Scout hut. Blunt, uncaring, fierce as he shrugged away his wounds: *I have an Uncle and a cousin*. At that moment, Theo knows he was right. Being back here has done nothing good for Harry. The silence tightens.

"So ... why are you here?" Harry asks, his eyes meeting Theo's for the briefest moment and it's enough, Theo realises, for him to snap.

"You're honestly asking me why *I* am here?" Theo spits out. "Why *the fuck* are you here?"

"Oh dear," Daphne sighs, she puts a hand on Theo's shoulder. "A calm approach, perhaps."

"Harry?" Granger's voice calls from the back of the house, coming closer. "Fred wants to know if they have any ketchup or if he should pop to the shop - oh!"

She stops in the hallway, staring at them all. She is wearing a strap top with a rainbow on it and very small, jean shorts and bare feet. Her hair is tied back in a bright blue scarf and she seems to be holding some kind of sausage in a bun.

"Nott. Greengrass." Granger seems to blush as she looks at Daphne. "Sorry, do you - do you want some breakfast? We're having sausage butties."

"No, thank you, Granger, we ate already," Daphne puts her sunglasses back in her bag and her eyes flit over Granger. There's an interest there that Daphne usually only reserves for textbooks. "Nice shorts."

"Thanks, you - you like nice too." Granger blushes.

"No ketchup," Harry shrugs and gestures to the locked cupboards. "Per usual."

Granger looks at Harry with a frown on her face. Theo wonders how long Harry's been like this, distant and curt. He wonders if it is baffling Granger or if she is merely accepting it.

"You okay?" she asks, moving closer.

Harry shrugs dismissively. Theo feels like his throat is closing up just seeing Harry like this. It hurts.

"I think they need to talk," Daphne says calmly. "Do you have coffee, Granger?"

"Yes," Granger stutters. "Um, yes, come with me -,"

Theo stands, rooted to the spot, watching as Granger leads Daphne through the living room to the french doors. Theo hears a Weasley chorus of "Greengrass!" and then the sound of a door sliding closed. He looks at Harry.

"How long have you been like this?" Theo asks conversationally. "Cold?"

Harry takes a heavy breath. For a second, Theo thinks that the question will be enough to crack the surface of whatever wall he's put up. Then Harry turns abruptly and walks into the kitchen. Theo follows him. Harry is opening a cupboard and pulling down a glass and saying nothing. Theo can hear Narcissa's voice inside his head: *he will veil himself from you*. This is it. This is what it looks like. Theo remembers how it felt when Harry fell through the veil. It felt just like this except now there is no death portal between them and Theo still feels like he has lost him completely. Or at least, lost the parts of him Theo wants the most. He doesn't know what to do, but he knows Harry. Honesty has always been the best policy.

"You promised you wouldn't keep secrets from me," Theo says. "My life and my secrets, you promised."

"I will protect your life and your secrets as you protect mine," Harry's voice is oddly distant as he repeats the words of their bond. He won't look at Theo. It's agony and Theo clenches his fists so he doesn't rub his chest. "Which I'm doing, and so are you."

"I can't protect your secrets if you don't give them to me."

"You protect the secrets you have."

"That's how you're getting around it? Getting around Dumbledore and Magnus and this and *Malfoy*?"

Harry stills. Theo sees him close his eyes heavily.

“Narcissa told you,” he mutters.

“Yes.” Theo tries to bite back his disappointment. “You should have told me.”

“Well now you know,” Harry’s voice is flat. No inflection. “I did something awful. Great. Let’s tell everyone.”

Theo stares at him.

“I don’t care that you did it, I want to know *why* you did it!” Theo exclaims. “Why did you even try to protect him in the fucking first place? Why would you enact a *fucking insane* Sanctuary clause on behalf of Narcissa Black to protect her son, just because she asks?”

“For whatever reason you think, I guess,” Harry shrugs his shoulders. It’s bloody infuriating.

“I think you’re lying.”

Harry’s eyes flash dangerously green for a second and Theo feels a surge of relief that maybe, maybe, he’s caught Harry’s temper and can pull him out of this infinite coldness and they can fight it out but then Harry shrugs again. He fills the glass and turns off the tap. It’s like he’s shrouding himself in mist, as if he isn’t even really there. It makes Theo panic but he tries to swallow it down. Blaise’s voice is in his head: *If there’s anyone who can sort Potter-Black out, it’s you, Nott.*

Consort. I’m going to be his Consort one day. It has to be me.

“Look at me,” Theo demands softly.

“Okay,” Harry turns around to face him and folds his arms. He won’t meet Theo’s eyes and instead, looks over Theo’s shoulder at the door. “It’s a long way back to London.”

Oh no, you fucking don’t.

Theo pulls his satchel off and slams it down on the kitchen table.

“I am not leaving,” he says, folding his arms.

“What?” Harry’s voice is sharp. His eyes take on an edge of panic as they focus on Theo, vibrant and green. *There you are*, Theo thinks.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Theo says.

“You have to.”

“Why?” Theo tilts his head in a way he knows will piss Harry off. *We can both be fucking annoying, Potter.*

“Because you’re *safe* there,” Harry scowls. He sets the glass down on the side with a ring of glass against the marble. “So you’re going.”

“Am not.”

“Fucking are.”

Harry's hands clench into fists. Theo sees a glow of the Black magic and he does not give a shit. He's also a little surprised when he sees Harry's right hand drift to a green rubber band on his wrist, plucking it like a musical instrument. It reminds Theo of something, but he can't think what right now.

"You might be a magical force of fucking nature, Harry Potter, but I promise you, you will have to bind me up and drag me back to London if that is what you really want," Theo says softly. "And I will fight back."

"Fine," Harry turns abruptly back to the counter. He lifts the glass to his lips. "Stay here. In muggle hell."

Theo watches him drink. Sees his shaking hands. Decides it's enough.

"This is what you were like, before we bonded," Theo says softly. "They make you like this, don't they? Being here? It makes you cold. Like it did with Black in the shack -,"

"Don't," Harry's voice is suddenly as sharp as a needle. "Talk about Sirius."

Theo sees rage light in Harry's eyes and then a second later, it's gone. He's shrouded, again, it's almost like he's pulling off his feelings and lighting them on fire. Theo feels like he can see it happening and then Theo realises what this is, what the coldness is, the distance, the feeling that Harry isn't being Harry at all. This is occlumency. This is Harry's not-caring occlumency. Harry is drowning his feelings just like he did Bellatrix's cage. *This is what that looks like. This is what he did with Black in the shack.* Theo remembers how cold Harry was, chilled to the touch. Theo knows that he is literally freezing his mind so he doesn't feel anything. Daphne told him to stop being Gryffindorish but Theo looks at Harry and knows what he needs. Harry needs a bit of a Gryffindor right now. *He needs to feel things again.*

"You love me," Theo says. Harry swallows a mouthful of water and nods. "Say it."

"I love you," Harry scowls.

"You're keeping things from me."

Harry doesn't answer. Harry's fingers continue to pluck the green rubber band. Theo can almost see it, whatever is going on in Harry's head which has created this landslide of pulling away, coldness and distance between them. *Fear. It can only be fear.* Harry shrugs as if it doesn't matter. As if none of it matters.

Nothing matters more than this.

"I'm not going to leave you," Theo says.

"Suit yourself," Harry mutters, with a slight flinch. It irritates Theo beyond end.

"I watched you go through a death portal. I killed someone for you," Theo snarls and Harry winces but Theo is not sorry. "I let Sahara kill Apollonius, I watched you be tortured, I watched her try to rip the life out of you, I watched you being possessed, I *will* suit myself."

"Fine," Harry nods.

He needs a consort, Theodore.

Theo understands what Blaise means but he doesn't know how to be that. He wishes, more than anything, that he had Harry's power. That he could ignite their bond at this moment and make Harry see and feel the strain inside it. He wishes he could remind him that it's there, that he loves him, that he's falling to pieces over here and waiting for Harry to stop hurting him. He can't do that, but he can at least do something.

"You know what suits me, Harry?" Theo edges closer towards him, close enough to slide one hand around his waist. Harry takes a deep, shuddering breath but he doesn't move away. It's almost automatic, the way Harry's hand grip Theo's shoulders like he is a life raft, the way Theo can breathe in the scent of him for a moment: Sweat and magic and what smells like barbecue smoke. They are leaning toward one another irresistibly. *He does love still me*, Theo thinks dazedly, *but he's scared. He's keeping secrets and he's making himself feel nothing because he's scared.*

"What?" Harry whispers, and Theo knows that despite his anger and Harry's coldness, Harry's relieved to be touched. Theo grips Harry's hips, feels how thin he is and resists the urge to pull him closer. They are close enough so that Theo knows his thoughts, if he thinks them hard enough and precisely enough, will float through the bond to Harry. So he does just that: *Hurricane me, Harry.*

"No," Harry's eyes widen in terror and he steps back. "Don't want to."

"What don't you want me to see?" Theo demands because this is what it is about, Theo realises. Harry's hiding something, something he's ashamed of, and until he tells Theo the truth, then they're stuck.

"Nothing, it's not that," Harry mutters, darting his eyes away.

"Odin above, for the Heir of Slytherin you are fucking shit liar," Theo snaps.

"Thanks," Harry stares at his shoes. The wall, which briefly fell when they were touching, has sprung back up and suddenly, he's untouchable, unreachable. Theo only has one thing left to try. If it doesn't work, then he's out of options. *If it doesn't work then maybe he doesn't love me, after all.*

"You," Theo says slowly. "Are hurting me."

Harry flinches but only nods firmly as if it confirmed his suspicions. He still will not look into Theo's face. He flicks the rubber band. Realisation dawns on Theo like a sunrise.

He knows. He's hurting just as much as me but he's decided it's worth it. Why?

Theo knows why. At this moment, Theo could rip out Albus Dumbledore's tongue because he is sure, he is absolutely sure, that this level of self-sacrificing nobility that takes up other people's happiness as well as Harry's and burns it alive has only been learnt from the Headmaster. Theo needs to make it stop. Narcissa's voice is in his head: *if he veils himself from you then neither of you are safe.*

"You are deliberately hurting me," Theo goes on. Harry's hands are shaking but he shrugs.

"Probably because, on some daft level, you've decided to protect me from something. Like Blaise and the shield vow."

Harry scowls darkly but says nothing, one socked toe following the line of the tile work. His feet seem to be trembling too. Theo presses on.

"I know that there is nothing I can do, right now, that will change your mind," Theo says quietly. "You've decided, quite absurdly, to hide things from me and you've decided that the pain that causes us is worth it for some stupid reason. I understand. I just need you to know that this makes me very, very fucking angry."

"It's not a stupid reason," Harry mumbles. His voice is a croak, almost on the verge of parseltongue. Theo could almost sing with victory because it's *something*. Harry's voice has emotion in it again. *He's warming up.*

"It is."

"You don't know what it is."

"I don't need to know," Theo snaps. "Dumbledore's taught you that your pain is a worthwhile sacrifice for bigger causes, for a war, for keeping people safe and it's utter bullshit. Any reason that makes you feel like this, that makes me feel like this, is bullshit."

"Fine," Harry mutters, rubbing his inflamed scar. It cracks and starts to weep blood. "Whatever."

"Fine," Theo echoes, pushing closer. He will not make it easy for Harry to ignore him. "This is your choice, Harry. No one is making you do this. You're the one pulling away, you're the one making it hard, you're the one choosing to hurt us, to hurt yourself -,"

Something flashes in Harry's eyes and Theo's takes a sharp intake of breath. They stare at one another for a long second, then Harry looks away, eyes guilty, and Theo knows. He stares down at the rubber band on Harry's wrist and remembers what it reminds him of. A page of a new psychology book that Daphne has been reading floats into his mind: *Techniques for controlling self-harm urges and triggering an endorphin release in less destructive ways.*

"What did you do to yourself?" Theo asks softly. Harry shakes his head like a worried animal, his fingers flicking the rubber band ferociously and Theo suddenly knows why. Harry might not have told him what he was keeping a secret and might have lied by omission (which Theo thinks is just as bad) but Harry doesn't *want* to lie to him. Maybe Harry can't lie to him, at least not to his face. Theo knows he can't lie to Harry.

"Did you hear me? When Riddle gave you the chance to go with him? In the Ministry?" Theo asks quietly. Not only Harry's eyes flinch this time, but his whole body does. *Well, that's something.* The finger flicking the band moves faster. Theo slips a finger under the rubber band so now, if Harry flicks it, he has to hurt Theo too. "You told him you'd had a better offer. Did you hear me? I was thinking it to you, so hard -,"

"I heard," Harry cuts him off, voice like gravel. Theo sees his legs trembling now too.

"What did I say?" Theo steps closer and rubs one thumb across Harry's cheekbone. He's cold. He's chilled himself down, just like he did with Black in the shack. *He needs to be warmed up.* Harry shudders and closes his eyes. "Tell me what I said, Harrison."

"Don't go," Harry voice is nothing but a croak. "I want you."

"I told you that I'm not afraid of the darkness," Theo cups Harry's face and slides his fingers into the tangles of hair. Harry makes a soft clicking sound in his throat but he does not move, almost

standing rigidly straight as if he won't let himself lean into Theo's touch. "You asked me, remember? At my mother's cottage, not to be afraid of your power -,"

"It's not just my power that's the problem," Harry says, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. Even his eyelids flicker. Theo pauses. *So this is it. This is the reason underneath it all.*

"He's ... in your mind again?" Theo asks carefully. Harry slumps back against the counter, his head in his hands as if he cannot look at Theo and speak the words aloud.

"When I'm angry ... he slips in," Harry's words are muffled into his palms. "And when I'm here with *them* ..."

"You're always angry," Theo finishes off. *I fucking knew it.* "So you're using occlumency all the time. You're cold all the time."

"Yeah," Harry sighs, laughing mirthlessly. "Exactly."

Harry lifts his eyes and Theo sees, just for a fleeting second, the face of the boy he met last summer. The same derisive, furious, desolate boy who was just as bruised and broken and helpless as Theo. He remembers the camaraderie of knowing together how it felt to live with people like their relatives. Harry doesn't smile, but he can see the relief in his eyes. *We know that pain. We know it together.*

"Does he ...," Theo can barely stand to speak it aloud, but he knows he has to. "He offered to remake you that time and does he offer -?"

"I'm a fucking mess, Theo," Harry's voice is suddenly hoarse, interrupting him. "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry but I am broken in so many ways and I just ... I *know*, okay, I know that his promises are all lies but I want it all to be over and that makes me ... that makes me ..."

Harry stops speaking but Theo doesn't need him to say any more. *I want it all to be over.* Theo realises, absently, that they've not talked about edges since Harry woke up in Venice.

"It makes the edges bad?" Theo says delicately.

Harry nods tersely. Refuses to open his eyes. Theo swallows hard.

"How ... how close to the edge have you been?"

Harry shakes his head but it barely matters because he is trembling head to toe, like a leaf. Theo knows then, knows at that moment, that it's been worse than bad. Something wakes inside Theo, something that has been raw and bruised and weeping in his chest for too long. It growls and awakens and speaks into his soul.

Enough.

He knows that Lupin and Snape and Magnus and Granger will have been doing everything they can, everything Harry will allow them to do to help Harry get better, but he also knows in his bones that all of it will work so much better if Theo is there. There's a pain in his chest that has been there for weeks and is only worse at this second, this tight, terrible second when Harry is keeping things from him. Theo knows, perhaps he knows it in the bond, that things will be better for both of them when Harry speaks the truth. *You will know who your odr flames for, Theodore.* It will always be

Harry. Maybe it is because of their bond, the fidelity of it stretching and keening for the other, but Theo knows that there is healing in that, for both of them. He knows it intuitively, just like his mother always knew the best time of year to pick healing herbs. If Harry will let it happen, they can both get better. Theo thinks of the first time he kissed Harry and how effective bluntness had been. *He might be the heir of Slytherin but he's a Gryffindor at heart.*

"No," Theo holds Harry's face, runs his thumbs over his closed eyelids. "Enough now."

"Please," Harry croaks, and Theo feels his words float on the bond between them. *Please don't.* Theo can't give him what he's asking for. Theo thinks of how his mother taught him to purge a wound. *First there is pain but then there is healing.* Theo pushes on.

"Do you regret me?" Theo demands, tugging slightly on Harry's hair. Harry shivers. The trembling is on the verge of becoming full-body shaking as if the effort of the conversation is rattling through Harry like a train. Theo doesn't want to hurt him or for Harry to hurt himself but he can't stop either. There is an urging need in his chest, where the bond sits, that won't let him stop. *We need to do this. It has to happen.*

"Never," Harry whispers. A tear slips down his cheek. Theo wipes it away with the pad of his thumb.

"Am I yours?" he presses.

"Always." Harry's hands are digging into the kitchen side behind him to keep himself steady and there are scorch marks around his fingers, but Theo carries on.

"Do you love me?"

"You know I fucking do," Harry growls, green eyes opening. They are breathtaking and gorgeous and full of heartbreak too, but Theo nods firmly. *Purge the poison.*

"Then tell me," Theo whispers. "Just ... *tell me.*"

Those two words. The words Theo was always amazed by, the ability they had to simply open Harry's mind and thoughts and heart to him. In all the time they have been bonded, Harry has never denied this request yet. Theo watches him. Harry looks thoroughly anguished. Tears run down his face but he does nothing. He seems unable to move or speak.

"*I can't,*" Harry hisses.

The parseltongue passes between them and Theo realises, suddenly, what this is. This is like the time when Harry would only speak in poetry after his godfather's sentencing. This is like the time when he wouldn't speak for five minutes after he found out Snape was his father. Harry doesn't have the words for this, at least not the words for this with Theo.

"Then show me." Theo leans forward, pressing their foreheads together. "I protect what protects me, Potter."

Theo waits. Like their first kiss, Theo will not press this. It needs to be Harry's choice. But it is agonizing. Harry is shaking so violently that Theo worries he will collapse. He is radiating heat, no longer frozen but now burning, as if he's burning alive. It's like standing beside an overworked piece of muggle machinery, and the air smells like burning as the marble under his hands smokes.

Still, Theo waits. Then slowly, years or minutes later, Harry tips his lips tentatively towards Theo's. Theo can't stop his thoughts from racing, not caring that Harry will probably hear every single one.

I love you, please don't shut me out of this, please don't leave me alone, this hurts too much and I need you, if we just do this you will feel so much better, I'll feel better, please don't stop loving me -

"Theo," Harry's words are less than a whisper, they brush softly against Theo's lips as he slips into parseltongue. " *My life and my ...*"

Harry kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Say the Worst Thing

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Selfharm/suicidal ideation/past suicide attempt/child abuse/homophobia)

Another big chapter.

This time, Twister.

Next time, Dudley stirs the pot.

Only one more Privet Drive update to go! I hope you have been enjoying them.

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

It is a sign, perhaps, of how much Harry's power has grown in the few days since they last kissed, that the impact of the blood magic is immediate with even the softest touch. Theo sees it all, every hidden thing.

He sees Harry cut himself on the beach in Skye. Hears Lupin's voice asking gently: *"did it help?"*

He sees Harry lying in bed beside his godfather, counting backwards from high numbers: He feels Harry's worry that if he doesn't make himself cold with his not-caring, he will talk back to the Dark Lord in his mind: *I give up, will you please just kill me now?*

He sees Harry cold as ice from Dumbledore's invasion into his mind, freezing his mindscape to deal with the pain of it and hears Granger's voice as she speaks about Theo: *"Harry. You love him."* Then Theo feels Harry's despair rocketing through his chest, so intense he has to rub that spot on his ribs that he used to when they lived at Fabiola's cottage. Theo hears Harry's thoughts. *I love him, I do love him so fucking much like I'm going to bleed to death with it, more than I loved Sirius even.*

He sees Harry standing on the roof of Spinner's end, perilously close to the edge, only held back from throwing himself over by the firm grip of his Sire, hears Snape's insightful but bitter words: *"You wish that you had taken his offer,"* and Harry's dull, despairing confession: *"He promised never to send me to war again."*

He sees Harry compel Draco. He feels Harry's regret and despair.

He sees him sitting on the floor with a thousand knives of ice made by his own magic pointed at him, only held back from killing himself by the magic of Magnus Bane and the collected power of a daemon, a werewolf and a spy. *"There are things worth living a long time for."* He hears Harry's own helplessness and feels his heart stutter at the words inside his heart: *If I become a monster, Theo won't want me. Nobody will. I'll be a freak again, all the time.*

He sees Prongs. He feels the comfort of the great stag and the memories of Theo that the beast gives him. He sees Harry's apology to his worried parents, *"That's why I ..."* Theo hears the end of

his sentence with a broken heart: *tried to kill myself*.

He sees Magnus and Weasley and hears Magnus' terrifying words about his father: *He did not want to live so he did not*. He hears Harry's implied words inside his mind: *You want to make sure I don't accidentally kill myself with my magic?*

He sees Dudley Dursley pushing into Harry's space. Hears the horrible boy's cruel words: *"That's the thing they don't know, isn't it? You're not a survivor, you little fag. You let me do it."* Theo feels Harry's coldness descending like a shroud, his desire to quiet his anger and shut out the Dark Lord's voice and just survive, like always.

Then, in a surprising sunny rush, he sees Harry on another roof with Ronald and hears Ronald's words: *talk to Nott, Harry*. He hears Harry's own thoughts. *What if the bond becomes a burden and he doesn't want to be tied to a suicidal insomniac nutcase anymore?*

"Never," Theo gasps, pulling away and feeling like his lungs might explode. He sways against Harry, whose hands have wound their way into his hair. "I want you, I will always want you -,"

"Theo," Harry protests softly. His voice is normal again. It is like the softest, most perfect music. "You don't have to -,"

"Don't you remember, that time in the Forbidden forest?" Theo wraps his arms all the way around Harry's waist and presses his lips against Harry's rune mark on his throat. Harry breath stutters and Theo tastes his salty tears. "If you're too broken, then I'm too broken ..."

"Broken together," Harry breathes out slowly. He is steady again. The trembling has stopped. The smell of the burning has lessened. *It's helping. I'm helping him*. "I ... I really do love you."

Around them and between them, blue and gold light erupts as if it has only been waiting for Harry's words. It bursts out of Harry's chest like a miracle and Theo could weep in relief. *Thank fucking Odin*.

"I love you too. So much." Theo swallows hard, his heart is soaring. "What happened, what you tried to do to yourself -,"

Harry stares at him with tears in his eyes. He looks so utterly wretched that Theo's heart breaks. *He thought I would leave him because of this*.

"It's alright," Theo whispers, wiping away Harry's tears even as new ones fall. He wonders if Harry has even cried about his suicide attempt yet. "I love you. You ... you don't need to hide from me."

Harry's face crumples. He utters a small, broken groan that almost sounds like Theo's name and presses his face into Theo's neck. The bond flexes around them and Theo feels Harry's facial muscles relax, pressed against his. There is so much to talk about, (Harry tried to kill himself and they *have* to talk about it) but Theo knows not to press right now because somehow, with the bond alight between them, he can feel that part of Harry is still held back.

"Is there more?" Theo whispers into Harry's hair. "Other secrets?"

"I ... yes, but -," Harry hesitates. Theo doesn't need to wonder what it is. He knows. It's where everything changed for Harry, where everything changed for both of them. *Behind the veil.*

"It's about the veil?" Theo's voice is just a breath. "What happened beyond?"

"Theo," Harry's voice is desperate. "I don't ... it's ... it's just *so fucking much* -, "

"It's okay, whatever it is, it's okay. It will be better if we both know," Theo leans forward until his lips are only a whisper away from Harry's. "Just ... just try."

"Don't be ..." Harry stutters. "Don't be ... scared."

"I'm not scared," Theo says and for the first time in a month, for the first time since Harry came back through the veil, it's true. He presses his lips to the corner of Harry's lips, just the slightest flutter. *Trust me with this*, Theo thinks, knowing that his words will flow through the bond, *my life and my secrets, beloved.*

"*Mine*," Harry hisses softly and kisses Theo again, this time fiercely, as if he is throwing himself into this revelation head first like the true reckless Gryffindor he is, and the bond glows even brighter around them.

Theo sees the moment in the Department of Mysteries when Black cuts his hand and Harry tastes his blood. He sees the power that erupts, the huge wolf made of magic and hears Black's scream: *you're a fucking Necromancer!* The feeling of power is incredible, but also draining and Theo feels like he cannot breathe. He clings on, and then Harry's before the veil and Theo sees through Harry's as he steps through. Then more power, less breath, more magic than Theo ever thought it was possible to feel and *how could Harry possibly cross through this much magic and survive?* Then nothing. Darkness. Distantly, Theo feels himself falling.

"Fuck! Theo, I'm sorry, I just - I don't think I can show you behind the veil -," Harry babbles above him. Theo distantly realises he is on the floor. On the floor in Privet Drive.

"Can't ... breathe ..." Theo gasps. "Hurricane ..."

"Worse than usual?"

In an absent way, Theo fucking loves that they have a normal level of hurricane. *Fuck, I have missed this.*

"A bit," he gasps, trying to catch his breath and failing.

"HERMIONE!"

Theo winces at Harry's scream. He tries to open his eyes but his head is ringing and the sharp, artificial light of the muggle lamp above him is making his stomach lurch nauseously.

"What's the matter? Harry?" Granger's voice shouts and Theo hears pattering feet and then a gasp. "What have you done to Nott?"

"Nothing!" Harry exclaims. Theo feels warm hands manoeuvring his head, and then denim under his neck. His head is resting on Harry's lap and that makes him very happy because Harry is *warm* again and he didn't realise how much he needed that to be true because he knows what it means: *he's really here. He's not hiding. He's with me again.* "I swear, we were just kissing and -,"

"Step aside, Granger," Theo hears Daphne's voice and then feels a cool hand on his forehead. "What is the ailment?"

"I'm fine," Theo wheezes, trying to open his eyes and flinching and the bright light. "Harry's panicking, just a headache."

"Because you *fainted!*" Harry snaps.

There is a clamour of footsteps and then more voices join the fray.

"Just kissing, Harry? I know you're a big deal but none of the people I've kissed has literally fainted," George Weasley chortles.

"Nott swooned!" Fred Weasley snickers. Theo opens his eyes to glare at the pair of them and sees two ginger outlines by the door, both wearing muggle attire and grinning. Fred Weasley seems to be munching on a sausage butt and George Weasley is sipping a cup of coffee.

"We cannot use wand magic in a muggle house," Daphne says. "Do you have any muggle pain relief?"

"I've got some aspirin in my bag," Granger says, disappearing upstairs in a clamour of footsteps.

"Willowbark," Harry mutters under his breath. Theo tries to glare at him, blinking in the light.

"Yes, but I'm not bleeding out so I should be fine," Theo says drily.

"I could pop to Figgy's if we need to, she's probably got a headache salve of some kind," George Weasley says.

"I will take nothing out of that cat woman's house," Theo says sharply.

"Probably sensible," Fred Weasley mutters. "I think the cake she gave us last night was from the stone age."

"Just to clarify here, do we all know about this?" George Weasley gestures between Theo and Harry.

"Yes, we are all in possession of our eyes, George," Daphne snaps.

"Not quite a vampire but she's definitely taking chunks out of you," Fred Weasley chortles. Theo hears Granger clattering back down the stairs.

"Here we go," Granger says. "It's the fizzy kind, it dissolves."

He hears water being poured into a glass.

"Can you sit up?" Daphne says quietly. Theo does, leaning his back against Harry's chest as Daphne tips the glass against Theo's lips. The taste of the water and the drug inside of it is bitter but he

gulps it down, mainly because Harry is stroking his hair very affectionately and Theo does not want him to stop.

"Thank you," Theo gasps when it is done.

"You should wait for the painkiller to kick in before we go back to London," Daphne says. Theo blinks his eyes open. His head still hurts but it hurts less when Harry is stroking him.

"I'm not going back to London," Theo says. Daphne raises her eyebrows. She's kneeling on the floor beside him, her sunglasses pushed into her hair. Granger is standing behind her, arms folded and staring down at Theo with a frown.

"You want to stay?" Granger looks at Harry. "Is that a good idea?"

"They won't see him," Harry says above him. "He's got my cloak. He can stay in our room."

Granger frowns. The Twins are frowning too. Theo doesn't care because Harry is on his side again.

"We still have three more days and I think this is an unnecessary risk," Fred Weasley says quietly.

"I am willing to take on that risk," Theo mutters. George Weasley crosses his arms.

"The risk is not for you, if anything bad happens we can take you out but Harry has to stay here until the charm is complete or he'll break his oath to Dumbledore and then we're really fucked," George Weasley looks down at him intensely. "The risk is for Harry."

"I take it that this is a ... hostile environment?" Daphne says delicately, looking around at their faces. She'll have inferred as much from what she heard from Kreacher, Theo's sure of that, but it's not unlike Daphne to search for further evidence to support an inference.

"Putting it mildly," George Weasley has not stopped staring at Theo. "Nott's presence will not mitigate the hostility."

"I appreciate that, but I'm not leaving," Theo croaks out.

"If you're going to make things hard for our Lord, you are, actually," Fred Weasley says sharply. There's a shiny black glint in his eye.

"Alright, before we get into that," Granger holds up her hands and glares between them as Daphne rolls her eyes and says something that sounds like: *Boys*. "Harry, what do you want?"

Theo tenses. He doesn't know if Harry is going to send him away again.

"Just one night," Harry says.

"I'm not going back to London," Theo says stubbornly. He'll sit outside in the invisibility cloak if he has to.

"You don't have to," Harry strokes Theo's hair back from his forehead. It feels amazing. "Kreacher can take you back ... back to my house. You can wait for me there."

Theo tips his face back to look into Harry's eyes, thinks words very hard: *Don't push me away*. Harry shakes his head and strokes his cheek. Words float back through the bond to Theo: *I'm not*.

"They're right," Harry says. "It's a risk, not just for me but for Hermione too. So you can go back to my house tomorrow and stay with Moony and I'll meet you there when the charm's done. It'll only be two nights before I'm back."

He's looking into Theo's eyes again and Theo's relieved to see there is no lie there. Harry's done lots of stupid things in the last few weeks but one thing Theo will always love about him is that he is an adorably bad liar. Theo doesn't like it, not as much as staying here in Harry's presence, but he accepts. He nods and feels the energy in the room shift.

"Come out and have some food," Granger says. "You look terrible."

"I think I need to lie down," Theo says. He's not ready, just yet, to give up these precious moments of being alone with Harry.

"Come on," Harry pulls him to his feet. "Let's go upstairs."

"That is not at all subtle, Harry," Daphne says, shaking her head.

"They never are," Granger mutters and Daphne smiles at her. Theo watches how Granger flushes but doesn't have time to think about it now. Harry has pulled Theo's arm over his shoulder and is walking them up the stairs.

"Leave the door open!" Granger calls after them.

"Merlin, Hermione, you sound like our mum," George Weasley giggles.

"Do you want to give him 'the talk' too?" Fred Weasley sniggers. "Hey, Harry, anyone taught you the relevant 'wand' spells yet?"

"Stop being awkward!" Harry calls back.

"I don't think an open door will make a hint of difference," Daphne says wryly, "and Theo is more than proficient in any spell casting."

Fuck off, Daphne," Theo mumbles, letting Harry guide him along the landing. Downstairs, he hears the Twins laughing and going back outside. Then he hears Granger and Daphne speaking. They have clearly lingered.

"Have - have you read the Charms textbook for next year?" Granger asks, sounding as unsure as Theo has ever heard her.

"Yes, I particularly liked chapter seven, though the description of expansion charms seems -,"

"Reductive! I know!"

"My friend likes your friend," Theo mutters.

"Don't start, I can't get my head around it," Harry's longer curls fall in front of his eyes as he shakes his head. "Why do all our friends fancy each other?"

"I think that's pretty common for groups of teenagers." Theo looks around Harry's bedroom. It looks very different. Granger's presence is a definite improvement. Her flowery sheets on the airbed, her clothes and her books, it all makes it look less like a prison cell.

"That's weird. I only fancy you."

Theo's stomach twists with delight.

"That's not weird, that's precisely as it should be," Theo says tartly and Harry smirks. Harry helps him sit on Harry's bed, covered in charmed sheets, and Theo tries not to remember the last time he was here. Harry guides him to lying down and then clambers in next to him, cuddling against Theo's side. Theo doesn't have words for how perfect it feels.

"Do you feel okay?" Harry asks him.

"Bit better," Theo swallows. His head is improving with every moment he spends in Harry's presence. "What couldn't I see? Behind the veil?"

"I ... What do you know about Necromancy?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Theo feels his headache returning. He remembers the words Black shouted before Harry went through the veil. He sighs and rubs his forehead. Harry reaches up and does it for him. It is much better. Slowly, Theo draws knowledge out of his internal library. Luckily, the book he's currently reading had a chapter on this very subject.

"Necromancy is a shrouded art," Theo says quietly. "In some cultures, Necromancers are feared and vilified, in others they are honoured or worshipped. They use blood magic, can access spirits and can use their art to kill."

"I don't get why that's such a big deal," Harry mumbles into Theo's chest. "The Avada Kedavra kills people."

"It's the only spell that does."

"Wait, that's surely bollocks," Harry frowns up at him. "If I use a cutting spell on Dudley's neck, that's gonna work, right?"

"It would but ... it's different," Theo hesitates. "The spell wasn't made for it. It can be used that way, but it doesn't carry the intent unless you put it in there. The *Avada Kedavra* curse is unforgivable because it is magic designed to kill, like the *cruciatus* is magic designed to destroy someone with pain. Necromancer's are different, they don't need a curse designed to kill to use their magic to kill or access spirits or speak to the dead, so people often attribute it to darkness or ill intent."

"That sounds like a fucking flimsy definition," Harry grumbles. "I think Prongs using my magic to kill someone isn't much different from someone using a *wingardium leviosa* to beat someone's brains out. I don't think I'm different."

Theo breathes in sharply. Here it is. What he's been waiting for all these weeks.

"You ... think you're a Necromancer?" Theo whispers. "Like Blaise says?"

Harry takes a long pause.

"I think I'm a Mage and people don't know what that is," Harry sighs. "I don't know what it is. The people who probably know the most about it are Sev - Snape and Magnus and they barely seem to know what's going on with me."

"What does Bane say?" Theo asks desperately. *Someone must know.*

"He says Necromancy could be my Mage gift, but we have to wait to find out," Harry says. His voice sounds tense. Theo is suddenly very grateful they are having this conversation in real life, because he can hear when Harry's withholding of something important.

"Well, why do you think that you might be?" Theo asks gently. "Is it something to do with what you saw? On the other side of the veil?"

Harry sighs heavily.

"This is ... this weird."

"Obviously. It's you."

Harry gives a sort of hysterical, helpless laugh. He thumps his forehead against Theo's shoulder bone a couple of times until Theo catches his face, forcing him to stop. Theo can hear the words that Harry said about himself in the memory of his attempted suicide: *ugly, nasty, worthless, useless, freak.*

"Hush," Theo says, even though Harry isn't saying anything out loud. "I won't think you're those things. I'll just think you're a chaos hurricane and that's totally normal for you."

Harry snorts and presses his nose against Theo's shirt. It feels odd to say he has missed someone smelling his magic, but Theo really has missed it.

"I feel weird saying this," Harry begins slowly. "because Hermione says it's all bollocks and faith and shit like that which I don't believe in, but Severus says it's not weird and that he feels Her too, in some way, or he's not afraid of Her and Luna acts like it's totally normal which, come to think of it, doesn't make me feel normal at all -,"

"Harry," Theo presses a finger against Harry's lips. "Just tell me."

"Beyond the veil I met Death," Harry blurts out. "She's ... she's kind of my friend now. We ... chat sometimes. She helped me send Sirius' Obscurus to where it's supposed to be. So maybe I'm a Necromancer but maybe ... maybe I'm just mates with Death."

Theo stares at him. He wants to keep seeing Harry exactly the way he is, rumpled hair, sweet, nervous expression, beautiful eyes. He doesn't want the influx of references that are speeding across his memory, words whispered in his mother's stories and instilled through his father's lessons in Norse lore but they come to him quickly, entirely unstoppable.. *Hel, the goddess of death who controls the netherworld, the only one who can cross the veil of spirits.* He recalls the serpent that brings the end of days, the trickster god, the tree of life. He feels a tremor of both fear and, inexplicably, utter excitement. Somewhere inside him, Theo feels as if he has been called to arms. A voice has whispered to him of destiny and Gods and the ancient rites of the Norse warriors and he is eager and willing to follow it. For the first time since Harry went through the veil, Theo Nott is not afraid. He is determined.

"Understood," Theo nods firmly.

"Understood?" Harry stares at him blankly. "That's all you have to say?"

"Should I say more?"

"You're not ... freaked out?"

"I am not afraid of Hel," Theo says. He hears Apollonius' voice inside his head: *Hel the Hidden would not release the son of Odin unless the entire earth wept for him. What belongs to her, she keeps. Theo feels a rush of ferocity. She will not keep Harry from me.*

"Who's that?" Harry frowns.

"The Goddess of death."

"You have a goddess of death?" Harry stares. "Dark."

"Says the boy who has literally made friends with her," Theo says drily.

"Hermione thinks it's all some kind of spell," Harry looks uncomfortable. Theo sees him clenching his trembling left hand, pressing his nails against the long self-inflicted scar. Theo carefully slots his fingers in between them, hoping there are not others littering Harry's body that he doesn't know about. "That it's ... that it's not true. She'd think I was mad if I told her this."

"You thought I would respond that way?" Theo stares at Harry in disbelief. "I was raised on the stories of *Niflheimr*, Harry, these are my Gods, why did you think I would deny this?"

"I didn't exactly think that I just thought ..." Harry's voice is gruff and he closes his eyes again. Theo knows there is more coming. "I thought you would be pissed because ... because of the Grim thing."

"The Grim?" Theo stares blankly. "Are you talking about your godfather's animagus?"

"No, I'm talking about her Grim, Lady Death's grim, the actual fucking guardian of death, Grim," Harry says emphatically, eyes sliding away from Theo. "Who also happens to now be my godfather's animagus, yes."

"You ... you made your dead godfather's spirit the servant of Hel?" Theo says blankly. In his mythology, it is Fenrir who stalks beside Hel and brings doom, but he imagines a giant black dog and a man-eating wolf are probably interchangeable, mythologically speaking.

"I didn't *do* anything," Harry snaps with a familiar surly expression. *Oh, you absolutely did something.* "He wanted to do it, to be her Grim and mine, and I let him -,"

"You let him?" Theo stares at Harry incredulously. He doesn't know what this means, that Harry gets to have a Grim, there is no frame of reference for this in Theo's vast mental library, but one fact of Harry's account is sticking with him. "You let him be tethered to you *again* and this time for all eternity just because *he* wanted to?"

"That," Harry pulls away from him and sits up, slouching against the wall with his knees across Theo's legs. "That's why I thought you would be pissed. That's why I didn't want to tell you. About the Grim," he qualifies and Theo is relieved that at least he sees that he has been hiding much for many reasons. All of which Theo intends to uncover.

"Because I would be outraged at the man's endless capacity to *annoy* even from beyond the grave?" Theo stares at Harry.

"No, because you're glad Sirius is dead and I'm not," Harry snaps, his eyes flashing bright green for a moment. Fury and heartbreak. "I miss him. I'm sad. I'm pissed at him, I hate him most days, I wish he had done better but I'm really fucking sad that he's dead, I'm pissed that it's my fault *again* and I'm pissed that after fucking everything I did, everything I gave up, he's dead. And you're happy about that. I can't ... can't be happy."

Harry takes a sharp breath and shakes his head. Theo stares at him. Can it be that for two people such as them, uniquely bonded and tangled in Harry's mythology, could have a wedge driven between them by something as normal and human as grief? For the first time, Theo curses his own ability to overthink.

I have been an idiot. Harry has been an idiot. We are idiots together.

"Are you glad Apollonius is dead?" Theo asks abruptly.

"What? Yeah, I mean, kind of, he was awful to you," Harry frowns. "Why?"

"Because I mourn him," Theo's voice is curter than he wants it to be, but he can't quite control his feelings at this moment. The words feel dangerous or forbidden to say, for surely Apollonius would curse such weakness occurring in his name. "I don't want to, I don't want to think of his absence, but I do. I mourn him and everything I did for him whilst he lived."

"Nothing he made you do was your fault," Harry rubs Theo's knee, eyes earnest. "He was a bad Dad."

"Sirius Black was a bad godfather," Theo says, gripping Harry's hand on his knee, hoping he doesn't pull away. "Yet you still miss him. Apollonius was cruel and distant and when Mother died he abandoned me just as thoroughly as she did, but still I ..."

Theo loses his voice. *I fail him in my feelings. As always, I am not strong enough to be a good son to him.*

"You miss him," Harry says, voice full of wonderment. Theo doesn't know what it would mean to miss a father who you loved as Harry loved Black, but he misses the knowledge that Apollonius is alive. That he is not the last of the Notts, left to face the Dark Lord alone. Theo nods.

"As you miss Black," he whispers. "Just because I think he was a terrible guardian does not mean ..."

"That you don't understand how it feels to miss someone who was shitty to you," Harry shakes his head and snorts mirthlessly. "Wow. We are broken together in-fucking-deed then, Nott."

"Seems that way, Potter."

Theo tries to smile but it is too hard. Instead he lets Harry kiss him, very softly, on the back of his hand.

"When Sirius first asked me to live with him, I thought he would be saving me. I didn't realise ..."

Harry shakes his head. "I keep thinking about that moment, that if maybe I had been able to go with him right then and there, I could have saved him. From being a shit godfather, from being so horrible to Moony, from the shack and the veil and ... everything."

Theo understands. He clears his throat painfully.

"When my mother died, my father stayed at her bedside for hours," Theo whispers. He realises he has never spoken these words aloud before. "My Aunt took me away, told me I was interrupting. When my father came out of that room, everything was different. I have often thought that if I could have just found a way to stay in the room with him, either I would have gone wherever they both went or I could have found a way to make him stay."

"It wasn't your fault," Harry whispers.

"Yeah," Theo swallows. "You too."

Theo knows they both remember.

Standing in the Scout Hut in the July heatwave this time last year. Harry, telling him that he thinks, on some level, that the abuse he has endured is his fault.

"It isn't," Theo says. Harry sucks in a breath. He looks like he's been punched in the stomach but he recovers.

"Yeah," Harry looks at him with eyes so sharp and green and insightful that he thinks he is being truly seen for the first time in his life. "You too."

Theo tries not to reel back from the words like a blow. Harry smiles. Not a pitying smile, but one filled with kindness and he knows that neither of them believe their own words. It is not the point. It is having someone say it to them that matters.

They stare at one another and the bond, the beautiful blue and gold of it, threads out between them, wheeling and diving to create a web of light around them. Theo stares at it in relief, almost exhausted to see it, almost moved to tears by the sight of the woven silks of magic blending together. *I have been so afraid of losing this.*

"Harry ..." Theo hesitates. He knows he needs to do this. Things might be better now but there are still problems that need to be addressed. It is only in looking at the bond that he realises how fucking unbearable the last few weeks have been. "I can't keep doing this."

"Can't ... can't ... be together?" Harry's grip on his hand is brutal, his voice is horribly detached and his eyes give nothing away but when he speaks, the bond around them judders violently, gold light twisting around blue light, as if it is fighting to hold onto it. The effect is immediate, Theo feels and sees Harry's despair. Harry takes a shuddering breath and closes his eyes. "Do you ... want to break up?"

Theo stares at him, the boy he would never leave, and realises just how much Harry expects to be left, how much it hurts him, and how much he is fighting to hide it but the bond can't lie. In the stretching, wheeling gold light that clings desperately to the blue, Theo sees the truth.

He is terrified of losing me.

"No, Harry," Theo reaches up to stroke Harry's cheekbone with his thumb, trying to reassure him. *This is the first time he's been able to say aloud that we're actually in a relationship and it's when we're talking about ending.* "I don't want to break up."

The relief is immediate, the gold in the bond flares up happily and Theo is suddenly encased in it. He gasps, the sensation of warm, sparkling magic settling into his skin. He looks up to see that Harry's eyes are wide and glassy with tears and flecked with gold.

"Harry," he whispers, feeling himself shake. *He's more powerful, he's getting more powerful all the time. Odin above, I love him so much.*

"Sorry," Harry mumbles, rubbing his eyes with the sleeves of his jumper. "I just ... I was scared ..."

"I meant that I cannot endure this level of distance again, not that I wished to ... stop courting," Theo says evenly, trying not to show how the delight of Harry's relief has spread over his skin like water. "I can't do this again. You can't hide from me like this again it's ..."

Agonising, Theo thinks bleakly. *Maddening. Making me feel like I'm dying with every breath I take.*

He forgets, of course, that this close and with the bond lively and bright between them, Harry hears every word. Harry's eyes overflow with tears.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispers, kissing Theo furiously. "I didn't *want* to be apart, okay? All I wanted was for you to be safe and I'm so fucking sorry but I'm *not* safe I'm ... I just - I just - I'm so ..."

"You're so what?" Theo breathes heavily. Harry is leaning back on his ankles, kneeled up in front of Theo, biting his lips with his eyes closed. He shakes his head, and Theo sees his fingers drift to his rubber band. Theo doesn't want Harry lose himself in dark thoughts so he grabs both of Harry's hands, feeling sparks tingle into his palms. "Harry, just ... just say the worst thing. Look, I'll - I'll go first. I thought ..."

Theo closes his eyes and remembers how he felt after the funeral. Daphne's question: *do you think this difference will change his love for you?*

"I thought you were changing and when you changed, you wouldn't ... wouldn't love me the same," Theo swallows hard. "That's my worst thing. Your turn."

Harry's eyes are open and he is staring at Theo, green eyes still flecked with gold. Theo wonders, suddenly, if his own grey eyes are flecked with blue.

"I ... I just ... " Harry takes a deep sigh and looks around the room. "Last year I was sitting here and ... and Cedric was dead. It was the worst thing."

"Go on," Theo says, swallowing heavily. He's unhappy that they're talking about Diggory but happy Harry is speaking at all.

"He was dead and it was my fault and now Sirius is dead and Arthur is dead and ... and your Dad's dead too and it's all my fault -,"

"It's not your fault," Theo says.

"There's a war because of me," Harry's voice is suddenly sharp. "Tom's back, because of *me*. I thought it was the worst thing, it *had* to be, right? It's the thing that's driving me crazy, not knowing who I am or why I do things so differently, it's the thing that's making me ..." Harry takes

a long, shuddering breath and closes his eyes again. "So fucking full of edges. But it isn't the worst thing."

Harry takes a deep breath. Theo leans closer and presses his forehead against Harry's. *It's okay, Theo thinks, tell me.*

"You." Harry whispers. Theo's heart clenches. "Theo, if you were gone I would ... I would lose it, but that's not even it, hurting you, seeing you hurt with all of this, I just couldn't ..."

"I'm not going anywhere," Theo whispers. "You don't need to worry about me, Narcissa's given me a book, I'm going to learn to protect my mind just as well as you protect yours -,"

"That's not - I *trust* you, I know you're fucking strong, you're a *warrior* for Christ's sake -,"

"Then what?" Theo presses. "If you trust me to defend myself then why -?"

Harry growls in frustration and suddenly Harry's hands are in his hair and he is kissing Theo, fiercely. In a rush of blood magic that leaves Theo gasping for breath, Theo sees Harry speaking to Magnus in the garden of Spinner's End.

"Because I need him to be safe," Harry croaks out. *"I am barely holding my shit together and if he ... if he's not safe then I can't ..."*

"Can't what?"

"Control myself," Harry's voice is a whisper. Theo hears the words inside Harry's head. *If he dies I will collapse the centre of the fucking earth.*

"Yes, Wixen do prefer to focus their fear on a notion they think they have at least a tiny chance of beating. After all, learning that you could wipe out all life is a little hard to process."

"I don't know if I could do that," Harry says. *"Kreacher thinks I could, but I don't know."*

Theo hears the harsh, bleak thought: *I only know that if Theo dies, I will want to.*

Theo is momentarily breathless and not just because Harry is hurricane-ing him. He cannot stop his mind for repeating the words he has thought over and over again, not caring if they drift through the bond into Harry's mind. *I would burn the world for you.*

"I get it," Theo gasps, kissing Harry's cheek and rubbing his nose against Harry's, not caring that he looks like a cat of some kind. "I really do, I ... I can't do this without you either."

"Does that make us horribly codependent?" Harry laughs in a broken voice. Inside his head, Theo can almost hear Lupin's voice: *that is a dangerous level of co-dependency.* Theo breathes out slowly. Harry has told him all of the worst things. He has told him about Riddle inside his head, about the thoughts and doubts that make him want to die sometimes, about fearing his magic will lead to a extinction event if Theo is harmed. Theo can tell him this.

"When I thought you were dead, it was no harm to me to kill Lestrage," Theo swallows hard, because the words seem stuck in his throat. "It would have been no harm to me to kill everyone."

“Yeah, but you’ve always been good at killing things.”

“No, Harry, you don’t ...,” Theo takes a shuddering breath. *Say the worst thing.* “I’m a murderer. I was trained to kill things, I’m a soldier and I ... without you, I don’t ... I don’t care.”

“What do you mean?” Harry frowns.

“I’m not good,” Theo supplies softly. “You feel bad that Mulciber died by your hand, you feel worry that you’ll turn into a murderer but when you were gone behind they veil I didn’t feel any of that, I just felt ...” *Cold*, Theo thinks. *Cold and furious and wildly deadly.* “I think it’s the bond we ... without you I don’t know if I would ...”

Theo lets the words trail away. Harry strokes a piece of his hair thoughtfully.

“They said, didn’t they, Remus and Severus said that the only way to break a bond like this was to die, and when it’s broken, the person who breaks it dies?” Harry sighs against Theo’s skin and it warms Theo all the way through. “Maybe ... maybe it’s not that. Maybe if the bond breaks and we don’t choose to break it, maybe we ... we break too.”

Theo thinks about it. He thinks about the roaring agony inside of him when he thought Harry was dead.

“Maybe it’s not that fidelity bonders cannot break the bond and live. Maybe it’s that a fidelity bonder cannot survive a broken bond,” Theo takes a deep breath and kisses Harry’s cheek. “Smart thinking, Heir of Slytherin.”

“Shut up,” Harry huffs, but Theo feels his cheeks blush under his lips. “So we’re not just codependent we’re ... dependant?”

“Your godfather is going to eat me alive when he finds out,” Theo mutters. Harry snorts.

“Remus is just scared,” he whispers sagely. “Werewolf bonds are kind of like soul bonds, I think. He knows how ... weird they can feel.”

“I’ve been ... sore,” Theo admits, pressing his hand to his chest. “Since Saturday.”

“Me too,” Harry huffs. “Like it was at the beginning, when it was settling.”

“So it’s been ... unsettled?” Theo trusts Harry’s interpretation of their bond. There’s something about the way Harry is with magic that has an intuitive sense, the same way Hagrid is with animals.

“Magnus says it’s because I was pulling,” Harry at least has the decency to look a bit shamefaced. “Pulling away. Or because you were pulling too close.”

“Are you ... done?” Theo swallows hard. “Will you stop pulling away?”

Harry looks at him solemnly. Then he nods slowly.

“Will you ... stop pulling too close?” he whispers. “Will you ... be okay if other people have to look after me sometimes?”

Theo forgets, sometimes, that whilst Harry is not academically brilliant like Blaise or Granger or Daphne, he is occasionally sharply insightful. It's jarring. Theo nods stiffly and thinks of Daphne. *Trust a few.*

"I can try," he whispers. "If you're not pulling away then ... I think it will be easier."

"And if we both stay alive," Harry smirks and shakes his head. "So you don't go on a killing spree and I don't collapse the world."

"That would be ideal, yes," Theo says drily. *And if you die at the Dark Lord's wand, I have already sworn to Odin that my life is forfeit.* "Try to keep yourself alive, if you would be so kind."

Harry takes a short breath in. Theo could almost kick himself. *He tried to kill himself two days ago, you insensitive muppet.*

"I didn't mean it like that," Theo whispers into his hair. Harry nods.

"It really ... it really wasn't like that," Harry's Adams apple bobs heavily. "It was more like the Tower, y'know? I didn't ... I didn't mean it, not really, Magnus says I have to be careful of my thoughts."

"I know, I heard," Theo rubs his finger across the rubber band. "Is this helping?"

"A bit," Harry tangles his leg into Theo's. "I think talking about the worst stuff, that helps."

"I agree," Theo tangles his fingers into Harry's hair. It's longer, much easier to tangle, and Theo loves it.

"I... I'm sorry I couldn't," Harry swallows and Theo watches silent tears slip down his cheeks. "Before."

I'm sorry. They are small words but Theo can feel the truth of them all around him. Blue and Gold magic made of honesty and love presses against him and Theo feels himself smile, softly. It is only two small words but Theo knows, he can see and he can feel, how much they cost Harry and that is what makes the matter the most.

"It's okay," Theo whispers, pressing a kiss to Harry's damp eyelids. "I know. We just ... we have to do better."

"Better?" Harry's voice is small and tired. Theo feels, at that moment, the weight of all the different ways Harry is trying to be better. *Trying to stay alive.*

"I need to ... to trust Blaise and Daphne more," Theo swallows the words, trying to ignore how hard they are to say. "You need to ..."

"Trust that you won't jump ship if I say the worst things," Harry sighs heavily. "It's hard."

"I know," Theo's throat is thick with sadness. Theo understands what it is to be scared of trusting others with the ugliest parts of yourself. He feels grateful suddenly, for Blaise and Daphne, who have seen nothing but the worst of him these past few weeks and still stayed by his side. "But please. I ... I will do the same. I wasn't honest about my feelings about Apollonius, with you or with myself."

"Yeah," Harry sniffs and stares at their held hands. "I think that's it. When I'm honest with you then I have to be honest with me too, and that ... fucking sucks."

"It does, in fact, suck," Theo says drily.

"Eloquent," Harry quirks a smile at him.

"I try, Potter." Theo kisses the corner of his smile. Harry rolls against him, a hand around his waist and face pressed into Theo chest. Theo sighs softly. It is all much easier when their bodies are like this, pressed together, inside the bond. Everything is easier.

"You're right, by the way, everything you said about me, about what Dumbledore taught me, it's all true but ..." Harry sighs. "I have all this power. What's the point of it, what's the fucking point of *me*, if I don't use it to protect you?"

"Protection is only true protection if it's consensual, Harry," Theo whispers, kissing his head.

"Who told you that?" Harry pokes him in the ribs.

"Lady Malfoy," Theo says grudgingly, knowing Harry has more outward admiration for her than he does.

"Huh," Harry sighs. "Makes sense. Narcissa's smart."

Theo will never admit it, but right now, he is overwhelmingly thankful for the insights of Narcissa Black.

"She said something else," Theo says quietly. "She told me that whilst power is worth nothing if it does not defend, it is worth even less if there is no one to defend."

Harry stiffens.

"What do you think it means?" He whispers.

"I think it means that there's no point having power if we lose everyone around us," Theo says.

"Did she say that would happen?" Harry's voice is suddenly urgent.

"No, why would it matter if she did?" Theo frowns.

"She scrys, Theo," Harry says.

Theo stares at Harry. On the one hand, he's feeling a little annoyed at himself that he didn't put it together sooner (*She's not a Seer, she's a scryer, you fool*) but he also can't help but feel overjoyed because here is a secret that Harry has given to him, freely and without fanfare. *This is how it should be.*

"Well then," Theo kisses the top of his head. "I guess we should listen and ... trust her, I suppose."

"Trust her?" Harry raises his eyebrows at Theo and snorts. "Bloody hell, what have you done with Theo Nott?"

“Shut up,” Theo pokes Harry grumpily in the arm. “Daphne says *Love all, trust a few, do harm to none.*”

“Measure for Measure,” Harry says quickly. “So you’re going to love everyone and harm no one?”

“Nope,” Theo kisses Harry’s nose. “Just the middle one.”

“Who?” Harry murmurs, his lips against Theo’s.

“You,” Theo sighs gently. “Blaise. Daphne. Lady - *Narcissa*, to an extent, I suppose.”

Only if she sends the books, Theo adds, silently.

“That’s a pretty good list,” Harry chuckles softly against him.

“You?” Theo asks. Harry finds it as hard to trust as he does, but they manage it differently. Harry sighs and stares up at the ceiling. He seems to be thinking the same thing.

“It’s not that I don’t trust people,” Harry frowns, green eyes blinking. “I just ... trust different people with different things and sometimes I ...”

“You lie,” Theo says, as gently as he can. Harry nods, licking his lips.

“In the beginning, they ... they always told me what lies to say,” Harry whispers, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Theo doesn’t need to ask who ‘they’ are. “They told me what to say if people asked questions at school or nursery or at the shops but later ... they just expected me to. To keep everything hidden because if I didn’t ...”

“They’d make it worse for you.” Theo rests his head on his elbow and looks down at Harry’s face, playing with his hair. Harry nods mutely, his jaw tight. “It wasn’t like that for me. She always told me to say nothing. I just ... don’t say it.”

Harry smiles painfully.

“So you don’t trust anyone with anything except for a few people you trust with everything and I only trust some people with some things and trust nobody completely,” Harry snorts.

“Except me,” Theo whispers. Harry smiles gently.

“Except you.”

Those two words are astonishingly affirming. Theo kisses his forehead scar. Tastes blood.

“Who do you trust?”

“I trust Magnus and Remus and Sev - Snape -,”

“You can call him Severus,” Theo says quietly. He remembers his bitterness more distantly now that he’s with Harry. “It’s fine.”

Harry shoots him a thankful look and continues.

“I trust them with lots of things but I don’t ...” Harry closes his eyes. “I don’t know if I trust them completely. Like, that they won’t just make a decision for me one day and I’ll just have to live with it.”

“You don’t trust them to respect your decisions,” Theo translates for himself, looking at Harry’s solemn, taut face. It makes sense, since no adult ever has. “You expect adults to ... to try and control you.”

Harry sighs.

“It’s what they do,” Harry says quietly. “All of them eventually do that.”

Theo nods and strokes Harry’s cheek, feeling the sticky residue of tears drying there. The only way that Bane and Snape and Lupin can prove Harry wrong is to do it, is to parent and guide him kindly and effectively. For Harry’s sake, Theo hopes they can, but knowing the failings of parents so intimately, he does not privately hold out much hope.

“And Granger and Weasley?”

“I trust them with loads of stuff,” Harry says, opening his eyes and frowning at the ceiling. “But not ... not everything. There are parts of me that are ... too much.”

“Like beyond the veil?” Theo prompts. Harry nods, swallowing hard.

“And here,” Harry looks drearily around. “There’s something about this they don’t get.”

Theo pauses and strokes Harry gently.

“The thing your cousin said,” he whispers. *You liked it.* Harry’s eyes blaze furiously for a moment but his jaw is tight as steel.

“He was right in some ways,” Harry says, voice flat. “I never liked it, obviously, but I liked ... knowing the rules.”

Theo nods sharply. He knows that. His aunt may have beat him and burned him but at least he always knew what to expect from her. Adults he doesn’t understand are much more terrifying.

“It’s not like I wish I was back here, obviously, this place is such a shithole,” Harry carries on quickly. “Of course I don’t, but ... I *know* how to do this. Vernon and Petunia and Dudley, I *know* how to survive this. The veil and Sirius and Tom and - and Bellatrix ...” Harry voice disappears for a moment and Theo presses his heir ring softly against Harry’s throat and thinks the word: *Breathe*. Harry takes a shuddering breath, shooting Theo a grateful glance. When he speaks, his voice is croaky but still in English, at least. “I don’t know how to survive all that. Not like I know this. Hermione, Ron, they ... they don’t get that.”

“I do,” Theo says simply.

“Yeah?” Harry looks at him with relieved eyes. Theo nods and rests his head against Harry’s shoulder.

“Last summer was one of the worst of your life, right?” He whispers.

“Yes,” Harry says quickly. “But ... no, too, because I met you.”

“Exactly,” Theo nods. “It was fucking hard for both of us -,” Theo thinks of trying to save Harry’s life in this very room, how entirely helpless he felt. “- yet I find myself wishing it back because at least I knew how to do that. It’s ... it’s not just us anymore and that ...” *Is fucking exhausting and terrifying*, “... is hard.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathes out a sigh of relief. “It is. It’s more people and all of this stuff, the Mage stuff, the Necromancer stuff, the death stuff, *Sirius*, I ... I don’t know how to survive it so maybe that’s why ...”

“Why your magic tries to help you kill yourself occasionally,” Theo whispers.

“Yeah,” Harry mumbles, looking so utterly desolate that Theo can’t resist huddling Harry close, letting their shared breath mingle inside the cocoon of the bond.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Theo whispers. “I don’t want to be anywhere else, I don’t *want* anyone else, even when it’s hard and there’s fucking edges everywhere, you’re it for me.”

“Me too,” Harry chokes out, green eyes filling with tears. He sniffs loudly and blinks firmly. “Don’t you think it makes us weird though? Look at everyone else, I can’t even keep *track* of who Blaise fancies -,”

“Nobody can,” Theo says drily and Harry laughs wetly, looking at him with such fond adoration that the blue in the bond seems to glow around them.

“We’re fifteen,” Harry whispers.

“I’m sixteen.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Theo rubs a thumb against Harry’s collarbone. “Does it ... bother you?”

“No,” Harry shakes his head and frowns, “but it feels like something that *should* bother me.”

“I’m not sure it’s safe to talk about *shoulds* around you, Harry.”

“Fuck off,” Harry chuckles pushing him lightly. “I’m serious. Don’t you feel like we’re abnormal?”

“I think we’re a fucking miracle,” Theo says hoarsely, his throat dry.

“Flirt,” Harry rolls his eyes. “I’m serious.”

“So am I . It’s a fidelity bond,” Theo says but then pauses, remembering how much Harry hated learning the constrictions of their bond. “But ... even before the bond I chose you, Harry.”

“I told you not to do that,” Harry jokes weakly.

“And I told you I couldn’t make any promises,” Theo smirks back. “I’m here, Potter. Better get used to it.”

“I suppose I will, Nott,” Harry breathes out slowly. “You too, though you ... you can talk to me about Apollonius. I get it.”

Theo thinks about the memories he's been plagued with, of Apollonius from the past, of his mother's voice. Perhaps it would help to speak them aloud. He hears Daphne's voice inside his head: *It can certainly not hurt.*

"Okay. You can talk to me about the edges," Theo murmurs. "I want to know."

Harry doesn't respond but presses his face into Theo's chest, in a way that Theo associates with assent.

Harry breathes out slowly and Theo feels everything relax in his body as he is pressed against him. Suddenly, the gold around them alights. It weaves in with the blue, creating shining helixes of light, moulded together and twining together and Theo gasps, because he feels it. Harry looks up at him curiously and then smiles gently, as if he feels it too. He leans over Theo's face and whispers words against his lips, golden sparks leaping to burst against Theo's tongue like sherbert: "Okay. I will."

"I love you," Theo whispers back and lets Harry kiss him, tastes electricity on his tongue and feels the warmth of his beloved Mage pressed against his body. Theo feels weeks of agonising pain healing inside of him, feels it as if it were a wound knitting together and sealing itself, as if it were a broken heart starting to beat again. Theo kisses Harry back harder, allowing himself to lose himself in the feeling of the bond. There is joy in the bond, there is release, there is relief and mourning and shared grief but there is also hope again. Then, there is a loud crack and Theo feels a pair of long fingers gripping his ear in a tight pinch.

"Ow," Theo snaps. "Ow, ow, ow, fucking *ow* -,"

He turns his head and is face to face with a very unhappy-looking Kreacher.

"Heir Nott swore on his magic," Kreacher growls, "in this very room, he swore."

"Jesus this better not be about my virtue again!" Harry exclaims, slapping his hands over his face in irritation. The blue and gold of the magic disappears around him.

"It was just kissing," Theo glares at Kreacher, rubbing his ear.

Kreacher snarls at him and then his eyes fix on Harry and flick to the closed door.

"Master knows Lord Prince's rule about Heir Nott and open doors!" Kreacher snaps.

"What rule?" Theo asks.

"When Master and Heir Nott are in room, then door is always open," Kreacher snaps, leaping off the bed and hurrying to pull the door open.

"And you're a servant of the House of Prince are you now?" Theo raises his eyebrows, just to be annoying.

"No, Kreacher is stealing rule and implementing it for Master since Master's steward is as loose as a doxy," Kreacher folds his arms like a tiny bouncer and glares at them.

"I see," Theo sighs.

"Doxies are loose?" Harry sits up on his elbows and grins at Kreacher. Theo notices he has no objection to the suggestion that Bane might be. "How would you know that, elf Black?"

"Kreacher shall not say," Kreacher mutters, turning red. "Now Master and Heir Nott go away. Kreacher must make a bed for Heir Nott."

"How did you know he was staying?" Harry asks.

"Because Kreacher is not an idiot," Kreacher rolls his eyes. "Go and play with the guardsmen and the Potter sister."

"And Daphne," Harry adds before Theo can object to being told to go and 'play' like a seven-year-old.

"Heir Greengrass visits?" Kreacher croaks, eyes wide. "Kreacher must bring tiny tarts!"

He pops away. Theo stares at Harry who, with his rumpled hair and bruised lips and fucking *gold earring*, looks suddenly much more tempting than Kreacher is intimidating. Harry grins, seeming to follow Theo's train of thought.

"Come on," he says, pushing Theo back with a playful smile. "Let's go before he brings Severus back with him to glare at us."

Theo thinks it is likely that Snape would do more than that. Theo hasn't forgotten being shoved up against a tree in the Greenhouse of Hogwarts by Harry's father just for being found sleeping with Harry. The son in question is currently holding out his hand, an expectant expression on his face. It's such a simple gesture of inclusion after feeling so lonely for Harry that Theo swallows back a tightness in his throat. *We're together. We're together again. Everything is going to be fine.*

"You okay?" Harry frowns.

"Yeah," Theo nods and takes Harry's hand, standing up. "Now I am."

They walk down the stairs, past the terrible photos of the horrible Dursleys. Theo scowls at each one, as if he could burn off their simpering smiles with the force of his glare.

"Have they been ... okay?" Theo asks gesturing to the photographs.

"It's been fine," Harry shrugs. "We're in the garden all the time and when Vernon's here, Hermione and I hang out in my room. Petunia won't let Vernon near me right now. Dudley's so mad that we're having barbecue for breakfast every day."

"I bet he is," Theo mutters, staring at the locked padlock on the fridge. He's so glad that Harry is enjoying a petty food-based revenge. Inside his head, he replays Dudley Dursley telling Harry that he 'liked it.' Theo will take any revenge he can get. "How's she?"

"She's the same," Harry says quietly. Theo nods. He knows that if Vernon Dursley is the brute force in the family, Harry's Aunt can be just as vindictive and sly as his own. They walk past the cupboard that Theo glares at, and out into the garden. The Twins have moved the barbecue, it seems, and are watching as Granger shakes what looks like a shiny sheet of parchment out with many coloured dots on it to lay it down on the grass.

"Twister!" Harry exclaims, letting go of Theo's hand. "I love this game!"

Fred looks at Harry with a grin.

"Hello, puffy-hair," he chortles. "Ron was right."

"He was not," Harry scowls, attempting to smooth down his curls. "Shut up."

"An hour," George Weasley looks at his watch and gestures around the group. "Fred, you owe me five knuts."

"And you owe me a galleon," Daphne says smoothly.

"You were betting on how long we would be upstairs?" Theo raises his eyebrows.

"Of course not, betting if for fools with not enough information," Daphne scorns, pocketing the coin when George Weasley passes it to her. "I was making a sound investment."

"How does this game work?" Fred Weasley looks down on the coloured dots speculatively. "Is this some kind of bizarre muggle chess?"

"Sort of, but we play it with our bodies," Granger says with a grin.

"So like Wizard Chess then," Harry quips.

"Who's playing?" Granger asks.

The Twins and Harry immediately volunteer as does, surprisingly, Daphne.

"Um, it's not best in a skirt," Granger stammers.

"Any sensible person wears shorts under a skirt for travel," Daphne says, actually slipping off her perfect Chanel flats, something Theo has only seen her do for bed. "I am sure I shall come out victorious."

She lifts the hem of her skirt to reveal lace trimmed bicycle shorts underneath and Granger looks like she's going to turn purple, staring at Harry with wide, terrified eyes. George only chuckles to himself and gives Daphne a subtle high-five which she sniffs her nose at and daintily indulges in.

"That's what you think, Daph," Harry says, cracking his neck by turning his head to one side and then the other, the way he always does before a Quidditch match or any kind of game. "I've watched Dudley play this at so many birthday parties. This is my time."

"Not a favourite at your own parties?" Daphne asks. Theo scowls at her. He knows she is casually fishing for information but Harry doesn't seem to notice.

"Haven't ever had a birthday party," Harry takes up a stance on the Twister mat. "Let's go!"

He doesn't notice the way that Granger gives him a soft, slightly protective look and the Twins faces are sharp pictures of anger, but Theo does. Harry never hears the tragedy that is laced into every sentence about his childhood, even when he tries to hide it.

"Nott, can you spin for us?" Granger asks.

Soon, Theo is watching Daphne and Granger bending their legs over one another's stomach, Harry actually crawling under George Weasley's legs to reach a 'right hand blue' and Fred Weasley squatting comically like a crab to reach 'left foot yellow.' He's never laughed so much in his life and soon, Theodore Nott, the boy who has never played a game or sport beyond blood sports, has swapped places with Fred Weasley and is crouched low, left leg extended under Daphne's knee to reach a blue dot and trying not to laugh as Harry almost does a back flip, wiggling a hand past Theo's hip to a yellow dot. When they eventually all collapse, Harry falling onto Theo and knocking Granger and Daphne down like dominos in a tangle of limbs and blushes, George Weasley lies down on the grass and stretches his arms wide.

"Good game, this one, I reckon we could do a Wixen version that maybe involves levitation." Oddly, George Weasley looks at Daphne. "Any thoughts?"

"Not too complex," Daphne says lightly, tucking pieces of wayward dark hair behind her ears. "We could look at some schematics."

"Excellent," George Weasley nods happily at her. "We could go to the place in muggle London."

"Never again," Daphne glares at him. "Whipped cream and froth is not *coffee*, Weasley."

"Forgive me, Greengrass," George chortles, performing a bow at her feet. "I have sinned."

"Yes, you have."

Granger frowns. Theo wonders if it's thinly veiled envy at the easy and surprising banter between the two. Fred sees her puzzled glances and lowers his voice into a stage whisper.

"Greengrass has given old Georgie the third-floor corridor treatment," Fred grins reassuringly at Granger. "Out of bounds to anyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

"Oh!" Granger says, looking almost comically relieved. Harry rolls his eyes at Theo who smirks.

"Actually, it was much more specific, not anyone, just me," George Weasley smiles at Daphne with a fondness Theo does not understand, but then maybe Daphne has the special ability to reject suitors and still maintain their affection. "But that doesn't mean we don't have an excellent magical theorist on the Wizard Wheezes team, all the same."

"I do not mix work and pleasure," Daphne says primly, "and there is more than enough pleasure for me in the work you have offered."

"I love it when you turn me down," George chortles. "So polite."

"Good. You'll be happy to hear me do it every day for the rest of your life," Daphne says.

"Sounds like a commitment to me," George smirks.

"Wait, you're *working* for them?" Granger asks, looking stupefied. "But - but you're so smart!"

"I am," Daphne nods at George Weasley. "So is he."

"Milady," George grins, giving Daphne a little formal salute.

Theo thinks this might be the core of their unlikely friendship. George Weasley can be brash and loud and overbearing but he is also intelligent and inventive and quick-witted.

"Finally found a like-minded individual," Fred Weasley kicks his brother lightly with a socked foot. "Poor lad, they're so hard to come by. For a *twin*."

"Did you really hire Daphne?" Harry frowns from where he is sitting in between Theo's knees on the grass. "I thought you had to tell me things like that."

"Why would they tell you?" Theo asks.

"He's a shareholder," George grins. "Thirty-three percent."

"You own a *third* of their business?" Theo pokes Harry, astonished. "How?"

"It's not technically a hiring," Daphne leans back on her hands, extending her long legs over the grass. Theo notices that Granger's eyes flit over them whilst George simply grins and puts his head in Daphne's lap. Granger frowns. Theo sees Fred grin. He wonders if they've made some kind of plan to deliberately test Granger's feelings. From the look of Granger's furrowed brows, it seems to be working. "We have been corresponding on matters of magical theory. I find it both stimulating and satisfying."

"All the girls say that," George quips which gets him a withering look from Daphne. Yet she doesn't force him to move and Granger continues to frown.

"But ... but you're so smart!" Granger repeats and Theo thinks something might have short circuited in her brain. "You're just ... you're just doing it for fun?"

"For purposes both academic and recreational," Daphne says.

"That means yes, she's having fun working with us," Fred rolls his eyes.

"With me," George grins. "You're just the twin-like appendage."

"How very dare you," Fred Weasley protests, throwing an empty sausage bun at George's head. Daphne glares at him when crumbs land in her lap.

"You want to go into - into *inventing* ? Seriously?" Granger's tone is perhaps a little too sharp because Fred Weasley frowns and George Weasley lifts his eyes to the sky.

"You sound like Percy," George Weasley says lightly, but it's definitely a barb because Granger flinches.

"I am unsettled on a course of action beyond assuming my duties as Heir Greengrass in the Wizengamot," Daphne picks at some daisies. "But I see nothing inherently displeasing about the notion of using my intelligence and proficiency to create magical products that can then be patented for profit. Do you?"

"I ... I don't ..." Granger looks down at her knees. "I guess I've only really thought about the things I want to change in the future, just to make it, y'know, more survivable for people like me."

Granger's voice is a mumble. Harry leans forward and grabs her hand and then looks around at the others, a fierce expression on his face that Theo associates with Harry's natural stubbornness.

"Some of us have to think about that," Harry says firmly. "Gotta survive this madness before we can even think about thriving in it."

"You count yourself as oppressed as a Muggleborn?" Daphne raises her eyebrows as she threads daisies into a chain, George passing her extra ones from the grass around him. "You are a Lord Apparent twice over, you hold two seats with heavy supporters."

"Yeah, and I look like this," Harry waves a hand over his face, giving Daphne a significant look.

"Don't even start on the Wixen aren't racist stuff," Granger mutters. Daphne rolls her eyebrows.

"You think I would be unaware of the racial prejudice in the Sacred Twenty Eight?" she says drily. "Do you know how many East Asian families hold Wizengamot seats?"

"Two, Greengrass and Parkinson," George says swiftly.

"Congratulations, two points to Gryffindor," Daphne says sarcastically.

"Seems stingy," George complains and Daphne gives him pinch on the arm. "Ow!"

"You may not enjoy the privilege of others, Harry, but you are still a man with two heirships and two voting Wizengamot seats," Daphne says, dropping daisy petals onto George's nose. "When you turn seventeen you could make significant changes to the law, if you desired. You are not without political power."

"I'm shit at politics," Harry winces.

"He really is," Theo says drily, earning himself an elbow in the ribs.

"Does having two votes rather than one make a difference? Will any law really make a difference?" Granger's voice is suddenly scolding and she grips Harry's hand very tightly. Theo gets the impression, suddenly that these are conversations Harry and Granger have had again and again. "What law are you going to make to stop people thinking that Muggleborns are scum that deserve to be erased from the planet? Voldemort's not the problem -," both Theo and Daphne twitch slightly. "- it's the people who follow him -,"

"Or even the worse, the people who sit at home and think, 'you know what? Maybe it's okay that he gets rid of some muggleborns - thins the herd, after all - and maybe its okay that we blame all of this on some fifteen-year-old who just happens to have a lucky streak with a madman because, hey, at least it's not my son.'" Harry grumbles. Theo can't help stroking the back of his head.

"Yeah, what law are you going to make that protects literal children against being raised up of talismans of war and used as pawns to fight wizards six times older than them?" Granger's voice is full of fury and she glares at Daphne, all of her previous bashfulness dissolved. "Those are cultural things and you don't change a culture with law."

"I do not agree," Daphne says quietly.

"You're only saying that because you inherit privilege and power that gives you access to lawmaking," Granger says staunchly. "Rather than suggesting that a more democratic approach to lawmaking could be found, *you* think you can fix it."

"Perhaps I can," Daphne's voice is fierce. Theo's surprised. George Weasley raises his eyebrows from under the daisy chain crown he is wearing. Theo can tell he is surprised too. They share a glance. As the two people here with the best knowledge of Daphne Greengrass, they know it only a rare few people who receive the barbed tone of her ire. "Perhaps I can change laws which influence a change of culture. Perhaps what our system needs someone committed to changing it."

"It doesn't need fixing." Granger's eyes are dancing with an unusual fire as she stares at Daphne. "It needs dismantling."

Theo is a little surprised. Granger has always seemed uncertain around Daphne, but she doesn't seem that way now. Theo catches the edge of surprise in Daphne's eye, he can't tell if she is impressed or irked underneath that simmering rage, but he decides he should probably give her argument some support.

"If you promote anarchy for the Wixen government then surely the Muggle one deserves more censure. At least in our culture we don't persecute people based on who they love," Theo says quietly, but that only receives a horrible glare from both Granger and the boy he loves.

"Sure you do," Harry scorns. "How much bullshit did Hermione and I get this year before Blaise pretended to be my boyfriend and people thought we were together?"

"Your culture might not persecute based on gender but it does persecute on blood," Granger says staunchly.

"Oh it's *my* culture is it?" Theo looks significantly at Granger's hand. "Heir Potter."

Granger sends him a dirty look.

"It's not just muggle blood," George Weasley says, fiddling with a daisy between his fingertips. "We're Wixen-born so we get this isn't really about us, okay, but at the same time, we've been brought up knowing we have the wrong sort of blood."

"Weasley blood tainting the Black family line," Fred Weasley snorts.

"Join the club," Harry fist bumps Fred Weasley. "I'm the last of a diseased line, apparently."

"Who told you that?" Daphne demands, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Bellatrix," Harry's voice is icy. It feels suddenly like there is not enough air in the garden. "Right before she shot a killing curse at me and Sirius jumped in the way."

They all fall silent.

"If your father took such a curse for you then that proves that the disease is absolutely not of your line," Daphne says quietly. Fred leans down and squeezes Harry shoulder.

"She's right, mate, nothing wrong with your blood."

"There's nothing wrong with anyone's blood!" Harry snaps indignantly. "I've tasted blood and all it tastes of is people's magic, so it's all bollocks! There's no such thing as better blood, it's just different magic!"

"Harry," Theo pinches Harry's back, his heart racing. Everyone else is staring at him or frowning intensely. Granger's eyes flick to Theo's and they are full of knowing worry.

"Oh. Right." Harry looks sheepish as he glances around at Fred, George and Daphne, who are all staring at him with a combination of expectant, suspicious and amused expressions. "Any chance that you'll forget that?"

"Nope," George grins.

"Not a chance," Fred chuckles.

"Eidetic memory," Daphne says.

"Really?" Hermione stares at her in open admiration. "That's amazing."

Before anyone can speak, there is a loud crack and Kreacher appears, holding a silver platter in each hand and balancing one on his head. He looks like an ugly, animated cake stand.

"Kreacher brings tiny tarts for most honoured Heir Greengrass," Kreacher says setting two trays down before Daphne who nods imperiously.

"Thank you, elf Black, they look delicious," she says primly and Theo thinks he sees Kreacher's ears blush.

"And one for master," Kreacher adds as an afterthought, plonking a tray of mini treacle tarts down in front of Harry.

"Thanks a bunch," Harry mutters sardonically but he immediately scoffs down three mini treacle tarts.

"Soooo.... You're a Necromancer then?" Fred says, clearly choosing the moment when Harry can't speak to pounce. "That's what Sirius yelled before he died, that's what the Italian newspapers are saying, Blaise told me -,"

"And that's not including the evidence we've seen, like the massive amount of elemental magic you produced with Sirius' blood -," George mutters.

"We shouldn't be talking about this," Granger says quickly.

"That's because you know what *this* is," Daphne says, equally as quickly.

"She's right, we shouldn't," Theo says.

"You're only saying that because *you* know what this is," George says with a smirk up towards Daphne.

"Okay!" Harry is swallowing rapidly and reaching for a glass of lemonade from a platter of them that Kreacher has appeared with. "Alright, everyone calm down, I just ... no one knows what I am, okay? But yeah, I guess, I might be ... yeah."

Theo shares a quick look with Granger. This is a good way to play it. If people suspect Harry of being a Necromancer then they are unlikely to look deeper into what the truth could be. *A Mage who might be a Necromancer too.*

“How can you not know this about yourself?” Daphne asks, biting down on one of the small tarts. Kreacher is looking at her with fierce concentration and when she swallows, he nods approvingly. “Necromancers are born, not made, they are raised in communities all over the world, and wixen children are assessed constantly -,”

“Because I was raised here, where no one gave a shit,” Harry’s voice is sharp. The twins and Granger all stiffen, but Daphne is either undeterred or unaware, Theo is unsure which.

“But Ministry officials must have come to check on you, a wixen child in a muggle home -,”

Undeterred then, Theo thinks. Daphne is determined to scope out the range of Harry’s abuse.

“Daphne, no one came to check, no matter how much I screamed, okay?” Harry’s voice is incredibly sharp. Theo takes a quick breath. He believes that Harry could compel Draco. He believes that Harry could compel Daphne to never speak of any of this ever again, but Theo traces a soft line down Harry’s spine. He thinks thoughts to him through the bond, willing them through his touch: *Someone will hear you now. I hear you.* Harry takes a deep breath and takes another sip of lemonade. “Look, no one checked. The first wizard I met was Hagrid and it was a week before I went to Hogwarts.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Daphne says gently, holding half a tart in the palm of her hand and looking down at it reflectively. Kreacher gives Harry an angry look and pushes a mini treacle tart under his nose. Harry eats it, slowly.

“You didn’t know,” Granger says to Daphne consolingly but Theo knows Daphne doesn’t need to be consoled. She is watching Harry carefully with sharp eyes. Theo imagines he can see reams of muggle psychological texts flying past her eyes. *She’s assessing him.* Harry seems to be calming down as Theo strokes his spine repeatedly, chewing a treacle tart.

“Nobody did,” Harry mutters.

“We know now,” George says firmly, opening his mouth like a carp as Fred Weasley aims small tarts at his mouth. He misses and Daphne catches it, throwing it right back with a scowl.

“Versace, Weasley,” she snaps, brushing crumbs off her skirt.

“So, Harry might be a Necromancer, that’s cool,” Fred says, throwing up a tart and catching it in his own mouth, causing Kreacher to growl at him.

“I don’t think cool is the word most people are using,” Harry says sarcastically. “That’s why its ... y’know. A secret.”

“You know we keep your secrets, milord,” Fred Weasley shrugs. George nods in agreement.

“As do I,” Daphne says quietly. “Our vow, Harry, is ongoing.”

“Thanks,” Harry brushes crumbs off his hands. “You got a frisbee there, George?”

Then, it is as if none of it was said. There are hours of garden games with odd muggle names that Theo can’t recall and a perfectly reasonable dinner of fish and chips that Daphne and George Weasley go and collect from a local establishment. Finally, as they are happily engaged in a game

of boules which Daphne is winning by several points and dusk is beginning to settle around them, there is a soft chiming sound echoing from Fred Weasley's pocket.

"Dursley car coming onto the estate," Fred Weasley says, pulling out a device that looks like a modified sneakoscope. "Time to get Nott out of sight and Greengrass out of here."

They decide that George Weasley will drive Daphne back to London.

"I'm good with a car," George grins. "Does it fly?"

"No, it does not," Daphne rolls her eyes.

She gives Theo a stern look goodbye, before kissing his cheek.

"*Alleanza*," she whispers, before pulling back to speak to him directly. "I will explain to my parents that you are visiting friends for a while."

"Thanks," Harry says. "Look after Sahara for me, could you? But, uh, don't be worried if she, um, disappears. Just write and we'll tell you if she's with us."

"Magical boomslang, of course you would have an extraordinary pet," Daphne rolls her eyes.

"Not his pet," Theo says.

"We have a timeshare," Harry says. Granger huffs behind them and mutters something that Theo thinks might be: *idiots*, under her breath. Daphne squeezes Harry's arm and jerks her head towards Theo.

"Look after him, please."

Harry doesn't say anything but he nods and pulls Theo closer with one arm slung around his shoulder.

Then, in an unusual display of affection, Daphne gives Granger a kiss on the cheek, in the style of pure blood ladies giving a greeting or farewell. Granger stutters a goodbye, reddens comically and drops a boule on Harry's foot.

"Fucking hell, Mi," Harry mumbles. "Flirt less bad, would you?"

"Shut up," Granger hisses at him. "Let's go up before they come in."

They are upstairs and shut away in Harry's bedroom before they all hear the key turn in the lock downstairs.

"Upstairs with his little girlfriend, is he?" Theo hears the rough sound of Vernon Dursley's voice echoing from below stairs. Theo realises he has never heard the voice of this man before, this man who has terroised Harry. He pulls his knife out and casually opens and closes it, just to make himself feel better.

"Don't," Harry mutters, unwrapping a curly wurly and tearing it in half, dropping a piece into Kreacher's open, waiting mouth as he sits on Harry's pillow, carefully picking red skittles out of a packet with long fingers.

“Just being prepared,” Theo mutters.

“Good,” Granger breathes, turning a page of her book. Theo notices there is a can of something with a toxic symbol marking the pages of her book. It looks like he’s not the only one who’s prepared.

“Don’t think about it, Vernon,” comes a curt, female voice. Theo is sitting next to Harry on his bed, reading his book whilst Harry pulls memories out of his temple with his wand and puts them into vials for Kreacher to take to Snape. Granger is writing notes on the sixth-year Transfiguration notebook. Kreacher pops in with a late night supper snack of cheese on toast and they quietly laugh together at the house elf shapes Kreacher has cut it into, and yet it is still a tense couple of hours. Harry is calm and stoic, but Theo and Granger both jump every time they hear footsteps on the stairs. Theo has never thought about this, about how Harry must have spent years living with the tension of having predators just outside the door. Later, when they turn the lights out and whisper goodnights, when they hear other lights being turned off in the muggle house, it is a relief. Theo is lying on the second muggle airbed. He is staring at the ceiling in the dark, listening to Granger snoring softly and wondering how muggles sleep with stupid streetlights outside their windows and no darkening spells to stop the illumination, when he feels the floor creak beside him.

“Budge up,” Harry whispers, sliding onto the squeaky airbed beside him, a tangle of cold knees and warm breath.

“You have your own bed,” Theo whispers back, all the same moving an arm gently to pull Harry’s body closer.

“The last time I was in it I was bleeding to death which makes it kind of difficult to get a good night’s sleep,” Harry snorts, burrowing his nose into Theo’s neck. “This is better.”

“You’re right,” Theo smiles, kissing the top of Harry’s head as Harry drapes himself over him, head on his chest and a knee pulled up across Theo’s thighs. “Much better.”

Everything’s better when we’re together, Theo thinks.

“I love you,” Harry says sleepily, and Theo is suddenly immersed in soft gold and blue light. *Consort,* Theo thinks. *I’m going to be what he needs, I’m going to be what I need to be. I’m going to be a consort.*

“No,” Harry mutters. “Not consort.”

“What?”

“Sorcerer,” Harry yawns widely. “Mages have Sorcerers.”

“Sorcerer,” Theo repeats and then kisses Harry’s nose. “Beloved.”

“Shut up,” Harry breathes, but Theo sees the broad smile on his lips in the moonlight. Theo smiles too. He’s not fallen asleep inside the bond since Harry was recovering in Venice. Sleep comes quickly, beautifully, easily, and Theo dreams of blue birds flying in a gold sky.

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Petunia's Revenge

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Homophobic Language/Racist Language/child abuse)

This time, Theo meets Vernon.
Next time, Severus is called.

This is the last of the Privet Drive chapters. Next week, I will be back to bi-weekly updates on Tuesdays and Thursdays as Harry and Theo and Remus and Severus and Magnus get used to life back at Spinner's End. Obviously, nothing will be simple. :)

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

Harry dreams.

He is standing in front of the triangle of flame, watching as the Grim paces around it, its black sparkling eyes fixed on the two points on it that smoke and burn, like embers put out.

“Magnus told me he loved your brother once.”

The Grim huffs. It could have been a laugh.

“Regulus sounds nice.”

The Grim whines softly. He brushes up against Harry and he feels the soft coldness of his fur.

“I reckon it would have been cool to have a brother.” Harry digs his hand into the cold fur, feels no beating heart. “Magnus is kind of like my brother, I guess.”

The Grim smiles, as much as a Grim can smile. Death runs her long fingers through his hair.

“I compelled someone,” Harry whispers.

“I saw.”

Death’s voice is completely without judgement. Here, in this tasteless place, such things seem very unimportant.

“I have Theo back.”

“Yes, the Sorcerer is returned,” Death’s voice sounds lightly amused. “There is more balance now.”

“I did feel out of balance,” Harry reflects.

“When you feel out of balance, Master, so does everything.”

You’re a lynchpin in the universe, Harry.

“Do you know what my gift is?”

“I know who you are, Master,” she says softly. “I always know.”

“That’s good,” Harry looks at the smouldering triangle, feels that odd and confusing sense of something coming. “Someone should.”

Then he feels arms around him, warm and comforting, smells Theo, that perfect combination of treacle and lightning that tastes so sweet on his tongue. Yet when he turns around, it’s not Theo. It’s Cedric. He’s so much taller than Harry remembers, thinner too, and it’s his scent, Harry had forgotten his scent. Cedric was before his heir rings, before tasting and smelling magic became normal to him, but Cedric’s magic had a scent. Maybe Harry never noticed it before but it’s there. It’s earthy and leathery and floral in a way that reminds Harry of hot summer’s days.

“Want to come and fly with me?” Cedric whispers into his hair, and Harry had forgotten this. The way Cedric’s voice was always so gentle, his fingers slightly calloused from quidditch and smelling of rubbing alcohol that he used to soften his quidditch gloves.

“Yeah,” Harry mumbles, wrapping his arms around Cedric’s waist. He’s so slim, so tall, taller than Theo but Harry’s not sure he remembers who Theo is right now. “I missed you.”

“How could you miss me, dragon tamer?” Cedric’s voice is so soft in his ear and Harry trembles as his lips trace against Harry’s cheek. Cedric’s breath always smelled like mint tea, a favourite of his. How could Harry have forgotten that? “I’ll never leave you.”

“Are you sure?” Harry’s words are wobbly.

“Half a year, Harry,” Cedric whispers. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Sirius is falling through the Veil. Arthur is bleeding out over Harry’s legs. Cedric is on the floor, his Hufflepuff Jersey stained. His eyes, his beautiful hazel eyes, are blank.

“Crucio!”

Pain rockets through Harry’s head and he screams.

“Harry? Harry?”

Harry’s awake, gasping, aware that he’s screamed because his throat is sore and aware there are warm arms around him, holding him tight. Safe.

“It’s okay, Granger, I’ve got him,” a calm voice says. A blue voice, made of a song that Harry loves. *Theo*. “Harry, it’s okay -,”

“No, no, it’s - it’s -,” Harry can feel the sparks building up in his fingertips and he has Magnus’ voice in his head: *he did not want to live so he did not*. “I - I need my - my rubber band.”

“Okay,” Theo guides Harry’s shaking wrist to his trembling right hand. He plucks at it, the small shoots of pain helping. The sparks begin to recede. “Is there anything else I need to do?”

“Remus counts with him,” Hermione’s voice calls sleepily from nearby. “Backwards from big numbers.”

“Got it,” Theo murmurs. He pulls Harry close so that Harry’s back is slotted against his chest. “How big? What about 186,282? That’s the speed of light, 186,282 miles per second.”

“Jesus Theo, I can’t count that high,” Harry mumbles, pressing his hot forehead against Theo’s cold forearm.

“I can,” Theo says, gently stroking Harry’s hair. Harry can hear Hermione’s gentle snoring throughout the room. “One-hundred-and-eighty-six-thousand-two-hundred-and- eighty-one, one-hundred-and-eighty-six-thousand-two-hundred-and-eighty...”

Be honest with your mate, Greenheart, Sahara’s voice whispers into his head. He misses her, violently, misses her scales against his skin.

“I miss you,” Harry hisses without meaning to.

I am always with you, Greenheart. Trust your mate. Harry takes a deep breath. Theo is still counting.

“One-hundred-and-eighty-six-thousand-two-hundred-and-seventy-eight ...”

“It was Cedric,” Harry whispers. Theo’s fingers still for a second but then he keeps going.

“Okay,” Theo’s voice is warm on the back of Harry’s neck. He hesitates for a moment and then keeps speaking in a soft tone. “You can tell me.”

Can I? Harry thinks.

You cannot hide yourself from your true heart.

Harry still isn’t sure what Sahara means but he remembers how it felt to finally tell Theo the truth. *Like I could finally breathe again.*

“He was alive and we ...,” Harry swallows and presses his face into the pillow. He can feel Theo’s breath on the back of his neck. “It was so real. Things I’d forgotten...”

“Like the past?” Theo’s voice is warm and Harry feels a kiss pressed against the back of his neck. “So bright and tangible in ways you didn’t remember?”

“Yes,” Harry says emphatically, overwhelming grateful that Theo understands. “You get it?”

“I remember things in dreams I had forgotten,” Harry feels Theo swallow, his throat moving. “About my mother. What else was in the dream?”

“We were together and he was ...” Harry doesn’t think he needs to mention the kissing to Theo. “Just like he always was. Things he said, the way he smelled ...” Harry feels Theo hold him a little closer but he doesn’t say anything. Harry’s thankful for that. “Then he was ... just like he was in the Graveyard.”

“You saw him dead again?”

“Yes,” Harry sighs. “And then ... the pain. Tom’s crucio.”

“It’s okay,” Theo strokes his hair softly. “You’re okay. It ... it happened but you’re here.”

“I forgot so many things,” Harry moans quietly. “How could I forget?”

“I know,” Theo sighs against his ear. “I’ve forgotten things too.”

“I shouldn’t have.”

“Sometimes ... it’s okay,” Theo brushes his lips against Harry’s ear cuff. “To forget. It means ... moving forward. It’s not your fault.”

“I’ve started to forget things about Sirius,” Harry whispers, feeling tears in his eyes. “Already. Just like ... which tattoo was on his elbow? I hardly ever saw it but I can’t remember and I feel like I *should* be able to -,”

“It’s alright,” Theo holds him tighter. “I - I ... Me too. With Apollonius. I ... forget things. Like the shape of his face. Already.”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry whispers.

“It’s not yours either.”

Harry breathes out slowly. Theo’s words help more than the stings of pain in his wrist. Harry feels the spark pull back inside him, feels the furious despair at the world dissipating slightly. He breathes in, thinks of the bond, and breathes out again. It sparks into life around them, glowing blue and gold in the darkness, brighter and more lovely in the limited light. Harry watches the blue light dance, admires it’s lively pattern. It seems more assured but also more calm than Harry’s ever seen it. In the past, whenever the bond lit up last year, the blue of Theo’s magic was almost frantic.

“You’re more ...” Harry whispers, struggling for the words. “I dunno. Trusting people more and stuff, or trying to, it makes your magic more ...” Harry looks at the way the blue dips and dives in the darkness in a motion that reminds him of soaring birds. “Free. Powerful.”

“Hmm,” Theo presses a kiss against Harry’s neck. “Daphne and Blaise ... assisted me in recognising some things about myself.”

“Oh?” Harry whispers. “Were they nice about it?”

“Not at all,” Theo snorts and Harry feels his lips smiling against Harry’s skin. “Blaise assaulted me with uncomfortable truths and Daphne threatened to lock me in the library with magic until I thought my actions through.”

“Wow,” Harry frowns, thinking of how gentle Ron was with him on the roof of the Burrow. “That doesn’t sound ... pleasant.”

“I do not need them to be pleasant,” Theo sighs. “They are my friends.”

“That makes no sense,” Harry mumbles into the pillowcase. Theo rubs his lips backwards and forwards over the fine hair at the base of Harry’s skull. Harry shivers. “Friends are meant to be nice.”

In the gentle of cocoon of their magic, in the softness of the dark silence, their whispered words are easy. Harry can feel Theo relaxing, can sense how much easier talking is for him in this quiet, muffled, safe space.

“I wasn’t raised that way,” Theo whispers. “Pureblood children are not bred for niceness or for friendship. We are bred for politics. We are bred to trust only our families with our innermost thoughts and feelings.”

“So you can’t have friends?” Harry frowns.

“Allies,” Theo whispers.

“But Blaise and Daphne are your allies *and* your friends,” Harry presses.

“They are, but not because they are gentle with me,” Theo whispers. “They are my friends because ... they stay with me. Our allyship goes beyond convenience. If they did not care for me, they would not scold me. If they were just my allies, they would let me ... fall apart. They would stand back and observe without intervention.”

“Jesus,” Harry mumbles. “Purebloods are fucking weird. Friends should be kind, at least sometimes,” Harry adds, thinking of how Hermione’s bluntness with him is sometimes utterly necessary.

“I don’t need them to be kind,” Theo whispers after a moment of pause. “I could not take ... tenderness from either of them. From anyone.”

“You take it from me,” Harry breathes, lifting Theo’s hand and pressing a kiss to his heir ring, tasting the salty magic inside it.

“Only you,” Theo kiss the back of Harry’s head. “From anyone else it would feel like ... pity. They know that.”

Harry considers it. He thinks about Theo and his weird friendships. He thinks of how Blaise and Daphne and Theo hardly ever joke with one another or play or mess around. There’s a seriousness to them that Harry doesn’t really understand, especially when Blaise can be so chilled out with Harry and Theo can be so tender. Yet he knows, he feels the ferocity of the friendships between them. He’s seen it in Blaise’s eyes and in Daphne’s too. They might not hug Theo like Hermione hugs Harry, or speak soft words to him like Ron does, but Harry can see in their eyes and smell in their magic that Blaise and Daphne would do anything to protect Theo.

“Fine, be mean to each other, you bunch of weirdos. You’re all emotionally repressed,” Harry mumbles, feeling his pain recede along with the sparks and his sleepiness starts to return.

“Bit rich, coming from you,” Theo chuckles quietly.

“Fair,” Harry yawns. “What did they ... help you recognise?”

“A truth about myself I had forgotten,” Theo huffs into his skin.

“What’s that?”

“That ...I’m a Slytherin.”

“You forgot?” Harry snorts, rubbing his nose against the fine hair on Theo's forearm. “All of your socks are green and silver. How could you forget?”

“I guess too much exposure to reckless Gryffindors,” Theo whispers, nipping at the back of Harry’s neck and making him shiver. “Professor Snape has a speech for the first years when they arrive. Do you know what it is?”

“No,” Harry shakes his head.

“He tells us that Slytherins are villified so we must always be united, we must never show fear or act without thought, we must always consider our path carefully and make sure all of our strikes are deadly.”

“Jesus fucking Christ of *course* he says that,” Harry mutters, rolling his eyes. He can imagine Severus doing it too, his dark eyes gleaming, his back ramrod straight, staring down at the first years with the same tightly coiled power that he stared down at Harry in his first ever Potions lesson. “Malfoy is failing on every point then.”

“He is generally not considered the best example of House rules,” Theo chuckles drily in Harry’s ear.

“So which bit did you forget?” Harry yawns.

Theo doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and Harry simply listens to his quiet breath, in and out. It’s very relaxing. Harry thinks he could listen to Theo's breath forever and not get bored.

“The bond has made me ... act without thought. It has clouded my judgement,” Theo says hesitantly. “The pain of it stretching ... Daphne said that if I couldn’t handle such a bond we should never have undertaken it -,”

“Hard to say that when I literally bound us without realising,” Harry swallows hard.

“I still consented, Harry,” Theo whispers. “But after the veil, after Apollonius’ death ... I need to remember who I am.”

Harry rolls over and stares in Theo’s silver eyes. He looks sleepy and relaxed, the moonlight cutting a sharp path across his face. *So fucking beautiful.*

“I never wanted you to be any different,” Harry whispers, gently tugging at Theo's necklace. “I want *you*. The sharp, moody, fucking smart, kinda deadly and very fit utter Slytherin genius/warrior who brewed an insane potion and stole a car.”

“Kinda deady and very fit?” Theo whispers, raising his eyebrows with a smirk.

“Don’t,” Harry rolls his eyes, glad Theo can’t see him blushing in the dark. “But I want you to be who you are. Always.”

Theo smiles at him softly and kisses his cheek. Harry nuzzles closer, closing his eyes against the warmth of Theo's collarbone as Theo presses gentle kisses to the back of his neck. He feels himself falling asleep.

"Same." Theo ghosts a kiss over the bare patch of skin between the neckline of Harry's t-shirt and his hair. Harry feels him sigh and settle down against the pillow. He's sinking back into sleep, Harry can feel it, can see it the way the blue around them settles like a slow wave. His voice is nothing more than a whisper. "Whoever you become."

"Go to sleep," Harry hisses. The parseltongue sounds like the ocean, far away, and Harry dreams of windswept cliffs under a thunderous sky.

— — —

Harry wakes up to a warm kiss on the back of his neck. It is the best way he's been woken up since before he was kidnapped. He smells burnt sugar and heavy clouds, ready to burst with rain. *Theo*.

"Hello," Harry murmurs, rolling over and finding Theo's face close to his, still sleeping. He must have kissed Harry in a dream. Around them, the blue and gold light of the bond has settled around the air bed, floating like waves. Harry thinks this is how he wants to wake up forever.

"Harry," Theo mumbles, pushing his knee between Harry's and nuzzling his nose into Harry's hair. "Love you."

Harry smirks and brushes his nose against Theo's.

"Love you too," Harry whispers. "Love you so much."

"Hmm," Theo sighs heavily, his breath warm and slightly sour against Harry's face. "Stay."

"Okay."

"Promise?" Theo's voice is so sweet and innocent sounding, so unlike his usual more guarded tone. It's adorable. Harry grins and kisses Theo's cheek.

"Promise."

Theo hums happily and huffs out a breath, rubbing his nose against the pillowcase. Harry is just sighing and beginning to drift back to sleep, the song of the bond musical and comforting and tasting sweetly of mead and magic around him, when the bedroom door jumps open with a loud bang.

"Potter! Give me some of those sausages you had yesterday!" Dudley yells. "WHO THE FUCK IS THAT BOY?"

Several things happen at once. Hermione jerks up with a loud screech, just as Theo swears and pushes himself over Harry in a protective move, knife held out, and Harry throws out a hand on instinct and white light bursts out of his fingers and the door slams closed.

"Fuck," Harry groans, flopping back on the bed and clapping his hands over his face. "Used magic."

Here we fucking go.

"Who is he?" Dudley yells, flinging the door open again. "Is that the faggot who tried to kill me last summer?"

"Yes," Theo growls. "I fucking am."

"Kreacher!" Harry yells under his hands.

Kreacher appears, standing in the doorway with a snarl and a kitchen knife in each hand.

"Ugly muggle will not come into Master's room!" Kreacher roars.

Dudley shrieks and stumbles back from the door but Harry already knows it's too late. It's been too late since he closed the door with magic. Now, all he has to do is survive.

"DAD!" Dudley bellows. "HARRY'S GOT A GAYBOY IN HIS BED!"

"WHAT?" Harry hears Vernon bellow out on the driveway. He must already be out on his way to work. "Not in my fucking house!"

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," Hermione whispers, fumbling for something under her pillow. "Kreacher! Use this! Just point and push the top down, like - like a cleaning spray!"

She flings it across the room and Kreacher grabs it, looking at it with a wicked grin.

"Right," Harry gets heavily to his feet. "No wands, the last thing we need is the fucking ministry, I've already fucked us with doing that magic -,"

"I was always going to do magic," Theo mutters. Harry glares at him.

"Let's keep it to heir magic," Harry says, knowing that Theo's heir magic can't be used offensively. Theo clucks his tongue but still flips his wand. "At least we know it's not illegal to use it underage -,"

"I can't use Heir magic," Hermione looks terrified and it breaks Harry's heart. She doesn't know how to do this, he realises. She doesn't know how to deal with an adult who might kill her in a muggle house. "I - the Potter magic doesn't do that stuff for me yet -,"

"THERE'S A THING TOO!" Dudley screams on the stairs. He pokes his head back around the door and screams at the sight of Kreacher. "A WEIRD LOOKING DEFORMED KID!"

"Muggle boy has a deformed soul and Kreacher will suck it out of his eyes!" Kreacher growls, pointing the little can directly in Dudley's face and spraying. Dudley falls back, howling, and Harry realises that it's pepper spray.

"DAD!" Dudley sobs, crawling away from the door with his eyes streaming. "HARRY'S MONSTER PEPPER SPRAYED ME!"

“This is a very good weapon,” Kreacher says, looking at the little can with surprise and excitement.

“Don’t get ideas,” Harry warns, glaring at Kreacher.

“Vernon, NO!” Harry hears Petunia scream. “Do not go up there!”

“THIS IS MY HOUSE! I DON’T CARE WHAT THAT BIKER SAID!”

Harry can only presume he’s yelling about Bill and turns to Kreacher.

“Kreacher, take Hermione to Figgy’s so she can go home,” Harry says quickly. Kreacher nods and disappears in a crack to appear at Hermione’s side. For the first time ever, he doesn’t flinch to touch her.

“I’ll tell the Twins,” Hermione says, her eyes fervent. “They’re of age. They - they can help if they need to.”

“Kreacher will be back to wield fever eye water again!” Kreacher announces and they disappear with a crack. Harry is relieved for a tiny second before he hears Petunia losing her fight downstairs and then hears the front door slam. He winces. He knows just from the way it sounds that Vernon is incredibly pissed and coming for him.

“When Kreacher comes back, you’re next,” Harry warns Theo, pointing a finger at him.

“I don’t think so,” Theo says grimly, flipping his wand in his hand. He looks, quite frankly, eager for the opportunity to use it and very unhelpfully fit in his tartan pyjama trousers and soft t-shirt but Harry won’t think about that right now. “Granger says the Ministry are watching for any magic against muggles, we’ll need to be quick about this and then get the fuck out.”

“Let’s try and do this without ... more magic,” Harry flexes his fingers and pulls the sparks back inside. “The timer.”

Two more days. I have to stay two more days.

“Fine,” Theo shrugs and tosses his knife in his hand. “Until it’s necessary.”

“Leave Vernon to me,” Harry sucks in a sharp breath out as he hears thunderous steps on the stairs.

“I’m going to nail him to the fucking wall,” Theo mutters, and before Harry can answer, Vernon appears in the doorway. His dark, angry eyes fixing on Harry and then Theo with something that looks like triumph.

“You disgusting little fag,” Vernon sneers, rolling up his sleeves. “You think you can do what you want in my bloody home?”

“Don’t come in the room,” Harry tries not to let his voice shake.

“Don’t tell me what to do in my own house, boy,” Vernon steps over the threshold. Theo throws the knife. Vernon’s hand is pinned to the doorframe and he’s howling like a dog caught in a trap.

“Theo!” Harry rounds on him. “What did I just say?”

“It’s a knife, I didn’t use my wand,” Theo says, flipping his wand carelessly. Harry tries, very hard, not to find Theo in fighting mode incredibly sexy. “You told him not to come in the room.”

“Yeah, because I have to stay here two more days!” Harry yells at him.

“Actually, you don’t,” Theo points to the hourglass on the desk. It is full. Harry stares at it.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY FUCKING HAND?” Vernon screams and Theo snorts with cold laughter.

“I thought that would have been obvious,” Theo sneers.

“Vernon? Vernon what’s happened?” Harry hears Petunia’s footsteps on the stairs.

“How did that happen?” Harry wonders, then he looks down at the blue and gold light that that was floating around the air bed and is now drawing up towards Harry and Theo’s bodies like they are magnets, softly absorbing back into their skin.

“It’s powered on love as well as familial blood,” Theo says curtly, not taking his eye off Vernon and pulling Harry’s basilisk fang out of its holster on Harry’s arm for an extra weapon. “Last night was the first night you’ve felt really loved here.”

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU TWO DO IN MY HOUSE?” Vernon roars, flailing against his bloody hand and trying to pull out of the knife, which of course, will not budge.

“None of your business,” Theo snaps.

“None of my BUSINESS?” Vernon screams. “I will KILL YOU!”

“You won’t,” Harry snaps. There’s a ringing in his ears. He wasn’t sure if he would know when he had reached the point of a last resort, but the sight of Vernon, bloody, trying to wrench his hand out of the door, his other hand wildly and ineptly trying to grab Theo, seems to be it. Harry lifts his left hand.

“*Bind*,” he hisses. Vernon is wrapped in white light in the doorway, like a fly caught in a web, one hand still pinned in the door and the other wrapped tight with magic.

“Beautiful,” Theo says admiringly, in a way that makes Harry redden. “Very nice.”

“LET ME DOWN!” Vernon screams.

“Well, that’s going to be annoying,” Harry mutters, flexing his hand so the white light starts to slowly strangle Vernon, just as it had Draco in the cellar of Spinner’s End. The Black magic caws victoriously inside his head.

“Can you fight with the Black magic all the time please?” Theo says, holding his wand in his left hand and pointing it at Vernon’s face. “It’s delightful.”

“Stop flirting, you’re distracting me,” Harry snaps though he sees Vernon’s eyes bulge and Theo smirk out of the corner of his eye.

“Dad!” Dudley yells, stumbling a little blindly back towards his father.

“Go the fuck downstairs, Dudley,” Harry snarls, flexing his fingers so the tendrils of webbed light reach out for him. Dudley stumbles back, struggling to see through red and weeping eyes. “I mean it. Fuck off before it’s your turn.”

Theo grins and flips the basilisk fang in his hand. Dudley squeaks and runs.

“I could chase him,” Theo mutters.

“Not worth it,” Harry says sharply, watching as Petunia gasps at the threshold of the bedroom, fingernails digging into the wallpaper.

“Vernon!” She gasps. She glares at Harry. “Let him go!”

“If I let him go, he’ll try to kill us,” Harry says, trying to keep his voice even. “So, no, don’t think I will.”

“Harry?” Fred calls from downstairs.

“Up here!” Harry yells back. “We’re using magic, but not our wands because of the trace!”

“Cool!” Fred yells back cheerily. “Sounds smart to me!”

Harry hears Dudley screeching: “GET THAT STICK AWAY FROM ME!”

He hears Fred’s raised voice shouting back: “It’s just a fucking shield, calm down, you moron!”

“Harry, not that I care or wish to discourage you, but your uncle is about to asphyxiate,” Theo says calmly.

“Oh yeah, shit,” Harry mutters, flexing his fingers and thinking: *release*, so that Vernon’s eyes bulge open and he splutters, gasping with the new air in his throat.

“You nearly killed him!” Petunia yells. “Put him down!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t, and that’s always been an important difference in this house,” Harry snaps back.

“They’ll never take you back,” Vernon coughs, his dark eyes fixed on Harry vehemently. “Not now, not with your Ministry what-not and your dead godfather, oh yes, your headmaster told us all about him -,”

“Course he fucking did,” Harry mutters.

“You’ve done it now, boy,” Vernon looks almost joyous as he speaks, breathless with rage. “Worse than what you did to my sister, they’ll put you in prison -,”

“You first,” Theo snaps, pointing his wand at Vernon. “Gag him again.”

But before Harry can think about it, there are footsteps on the stairs and George is suddenly on the scene, wand out and eyes bright. Petunia gasps and shrinks back from him, pressing herself against the landing wall.

“Not you!” Vernon growls. “You and your fucking sweets!”

George looks at Vernon in surprise, taking in the knife in his hand. Then he turns to Harry.

“Fred has got Duddykins safe in the kitchen,” George says quietly. “The wards are holding nicely but we need to move this all along quickly. If the ministry is watching, if they sense magic and think it’s being used offensively against this lot -,”

“It’s VERY OFFENSIVE!” Vernon screams. George ignores him.

“- we’ve got about an hour window before they get the DMLE out here. Malfoy will want to do it by the book and they can’t cross the goblins wards -,”

Do what’s necessary and get the hell out. That’s what Remus said and Harry is very on board with it.

“The hourglass is done,” Harry says. “We can leave.”

Harry sees something firm up in George’s face. He turns to Vernon.

“Will you let us walk out of here without any trouble and never come back?” George says, incredibly politely.

“You can get the fuck off my property,” Vernon spits at George, breathing heavily. His eyes rest on Harry with something like possession. Harry’s stomach clenches. He knows that look and knows pain only follows it. “That boy stays where he is. He’s not eighteen, his godfather’s dead, he’s our burden to deal with as we see fit.”

“As you see fit?” Theo snarls, his wand twitching. “You fucking abusive cunt.”

“There’s burn marks on my fucking countertops, there’s smashed glass in my kitchen, he’s a menace left unsupervised and he always has been, do you know how much he’s *cost* me in repairs over the years? Let alone private hospital bills for my sister and son! He’s a *danger* to everyone,” Vernon snarls. He’s white and sweaty but seems remarkably lucid for someone who’s hand is pinned to the wall with a knife. “I’ll not have anyone say it’s my fault when he kills someone, no one will say I was a soft hand -,”

“You’re right,” Theo growls. “No one will say that.”

“If you take him away then that’s kidnap,” Vernon glares at Theo and George.

“You don’t want him,” Theo snaps.

“Rude,” Harry says automatically, swallowing with a dry mouth. “But true.”

“Nobody wants him that’s why he’s fucking HERE!” Vernon screams. “And this is my BLOODY HOUSE! I’ll have every single filthy one of you thrown into jail for trespassing!”

Theo grabs Harry’s hand, as if needing to remind him that nothing Vernon has said is true. Vernon’s eyes rest on Theo with a sneer.

“You’d probably *like it*,” he spits. “You’re all alike then, aren’t you? All useless, jobless *faggots*, the lot of you!”

“Right then,” George says, eyes flashing. “That’s that. *Stupefy!*”

Vernon in silenced, a man hanging in a web of magic, utterly unconscious. Petunia screams.

“Mum?” Dudley yells up the stairs. “Mum!”

Harry releases his hand, the black magic vanishing. Vernon thuds to the ground, is left hanging by his pinned hand in the doorway like a puppet dangling from one string.

“That,” Harry turns to Theo, pointing a finger at the blade. “Is a very good personal retrieval charm.”

“Isn’t it just?” Theo smiles tautly. He walks over to Vernon and wrenches the knife out. Vernon’s hand begins to bleed profusely but George casually shoots a spell at it, despite Theo frowning at him. *Theo probably wants to let him bleed.*

“Vernon?” Petunia whispers, still pressed against the wall, her eyes wide as she stares at her husband. “Vernon?”

“He’ll wake up in a bit, don’t worry.” George says, looking at his watch. “Time to hit the road, gentlemen.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Theo comes back over to Harry and slides the basilisk fang back into Harry’s holster, squeezing his arm gently. Harry hears his words through the bond: *it’s okay. He’s unconscious. He can’t hurt you.* Harry gives him a weak smile. The last two things might be true but Harry does not feel okay at all.

“Don’t worry?” Petunia repeats incredulously in a hiss, glaring at Harry. “Is there no one in this family you won’t attack?”

Harry says nothing. They stare at one another and Harry doesn’t answer her. Vernon’s words chase around his head: *He’s our burden. He’s a danger to everyone. No one wants him, that’s why he’s here.*

“Let’s get all your stuff and get going,” George commands.

“Kreacher!” Theo calls. Kreacher pops into the room. Oddly, Petunia says nothing about it. Harry watches as Petunia kneels by her husband, eyes slowly lifting to look at Theo, eyes are resting on Theo’s necklace which is hanging outside of his t-shirt.

“Did Master slay the evil muggle?” Kreacher grins, looking at the knife wound in Vernon’s hand. “Good.”

“Can you take all of our stuff back to the wolf’s?” Theo says quietly. Kreacher nods and begins levitating things, moving them around the room. George starts to help throw things into trunks and magically deflate airbeds. All the while, Harry stares at his Aunt as she turns her eyes slowly to him. Her pale eyes rest on Harry with such violence he can’t help but stare back.

“You gave her necklace to *him*?” Petunia whispers. Her eyes are glassy. Harry doesn’t think he’s ever seen Petunia cry. He nods silently.

“Of course you did,” she sneers, blinking rapidly. “Just like him, aren’t you?”

“There are worse things to be than like James Potter,” Harry says stoically.

“Not *him*,” Petunia sounds disgusted. “That boy. The one who always hung around her. Your awful father.”

Kreacher, Theo and George all stop moving behind him. Harry feels as if he’s free falling through time and space, like he’s been thrown from his firebolt at full speed with only one thought in his head: *Petunia knows*. Dazedly, he turns to the others. *Do what’s necessary and get the hell out*.

“Kreacher, take our stuff to Moony,” Harry’s amazed at how calm his voice sounds. “George, go downstairs for a minute.”

Kreacher is gone in a second and the room is empty. Theo has his wand pointed at Petunia but she isn’t moving, simply breathing heavily and staring at Harry. George looks between Petunia and Harry, who stare at one another silently. Then, without asking, George extends his wand to Harry.

“I think you might need this. No trace,” he says quietly.

“It’s not gonna matter in a minute,” Harry says. George raises his eyebrows. “I know a rune.”

“Right,” George nods firmly and still pushes the wand into Harry’s hand. “Even so. Best to be safe. Do you know the memory charm?”

Harry nods and takes it without thinking. It seems to tingle a little in his fingers. Harry looks at it and finds himself thinking, almost absently to it, *you’ll be back with George soon*. The tingling settles down. George nods and walks past Petunia, who rises slowly to her feet, staring at George’s wand in Harry’s right hand and Theo’s hand on his shoulder.

“Are you going to kill me?” She asks softly. “Like he got her killed?”

Harry knows, deep down, that Petunia can’t know about the prophecy and everything it meant for Severus and for him, but the words still make him flinch. *He sold us out. He’s sorry, he’s more than sorry, but he still did it*.

“What do you mean, I’m just like him?” Harry asks, feeling his heartbeat in his throat.

“You and this boy,” Petunia spits, gesturing to Theo who bristles. “Perverted!”

“We are not,” Theo’s voice is nothing more than a hiss but Harry holds his arm out, pushing Theo’s wand arm down. Petunia continues on as if he hasn’t spoken.

“Just like he was, I *saw* him, down by the river with some - some other *boy* !” Theo’s hand clenches on Harry’s elbow. “Then the next summer, with Lily! Like he would just *switch* between the two! He ruined her -,”

“Tell me his name,” Harry has to know how much she knows.

“*That* boy, the ugly one from down Spinners End,” Petunia’s lip curls up in disgust, her fingers balling into fists.

“Give me my father’s name.”

He feels Theo tense behind him. He’s never used that word for Severus but he doesn’t care. Harry is trying very hard not to let the rising magic inside him slip into his voice. He won’t compel her, like he did Draco. He just needs to know. *Tell me the fucking truth for once*.

“Severus Snape,” Petunia announces each sound with absolute fury. “That awful boy.”

Harry stares at her. *Holy fuck she knows.*

“Do the memory charm,” Theo says urgently, gripping Harry’s elbow a little too tight. “Do it now, Harry.”

Harry doesn’t move. He stares at his Aunt.

“How long have you known?” Harry asks hoarsely.

“You’re the spit of him, even before you changed your skin to match his,” Petunia sneers. “Magic can’t hide everything, I saw that terrible boy grow up! Your mannerisms, everything about you...” Petunia shook her head with dislike. “I saw him more and more every passing day, hiding, underneath the lies of the colour of your skin, and sometimes -,” her voice catches but she babbles on. “When you were sleeping, it would stop, whatever dreadful thing you were doing to yourself or odd spell they’d put on you. It was like a mirror at the fair, I’d see him then, clear as day, just for a flash but I knew it was him. I always knew.”

There’s a slight ringing in his ears that Harry doesn’t understand. *She’s always known.*

“Harry? Harry?” Theo is tugging on his hand. “Are you with me?”

Harry can’t stop looking at Petunia. Theo’s voice seems oddly distant. He feels like he’s drifting outside of his body. *She knew. She knew. She knew.*

“Why did you keep me?” Harry’s voice is like glass being pulled over gravel. He can’t bear to ask this but the words are heavy on his tongue, begging to be said.

“You could have been normal,” Petunia hisses. “You could have! There was a chance that I could have kept *something* of the sister I loved, but you were all him! From the moment you arrived, no matter what I did, you were always abnormal. A freak.”

“Shut up,” Theo points his knife at Petunia but her eyes won’t drift from Harry’s face. “Now.”

“Mum was Wixen too,” Harry whispers. Petunia’s face contorts with fury.

“No!” Petunia snaps. “Before him, we were *fine*! But you ... you were just like him. Always strange.”

Abnormal. Freak. Faggot. Perv. Worthless. Useless. Awful boy.

“Let’s go, Harry,” Theo urges, but Harry is staring down at Vernon.

“Does he know?”

It’s an odd thing for his mind to fixate on, but Harry suddenly rashly feels that he’s finally on the edge of an explanation for their hatred, that perhaps if Vernon had really thought he was James’ son, then he would not have hated Harry as much. That there would have been fewer beatings, less time in the cupboard. Maybe, just maybe, this explains it.

“Why would I tell anyone? There was nothing I could do.” Petunia glares at him, hugging her bony arms to her body. “She was dead and he sure as hell didn’t want you.”

Nobody wants him, that's why he's here.

“Don’t listen to her,” Theo arm is around his waist but still, Harry cannot turn away from Petunia, as if her fury and fire and wrath are consuming every ounce of his attention.

“Did you ask him?”

Harry nails are digging into the palm of his left hand even as he can feel Theo’s fingers trying to stop it, trying to get between Harry’s sparks and his flesh, but Harry doesn’t given a damn. He has to know.

“I knew that boy his whole life, he killed his own father and then abandoned my sister, why would he want you?” Petunia’s eyes are full of venom. “Nobody did.”

It's not true. Harry can feel Theo’s thoughts pushing into his mind through the bond, warm and urgent. He knows it’s not true. He knows it’s never been true. *Remus wanted me. Severus did, even if he never knew about me. Sirius definitely did.* Harry raises George’s wand shakily and points at it Petunia.

“You should have asked,” Harry says. He knows the words to the incantation, remembers Lockhart shouting “*Obliviate!*” at him and Ron in second, but when Harry opens his mouth, only hisses come out:

“Legilimens!”

Suddenly, he is not in his bedroom anymore. He cannot feel Theo’s body against his. He knows he’s somewhere else. He stares around. The only time he’s done something like this is when he entered Severus’ mindscape. The inside of Petunia’s mind looks exactly like the kitchen of number four. *Fucking typical.*

“What are you doing?” Petunia’s voice echoes around him. Harry ignores her. He sets his hands on the table, full of magic, and thinks of what he wants: *Show me Severus.*

There are two children sitting in a park, watching daisies spiral in the sunshine. One is fair with beautiful ginger hair streaming behind her, one is dark, with dark curls ruffling around his face. The two of them are laughing.

“Why are you always here with him?” Petunia cries out. Both the red-headed girl and the dark boy look up at her in dismay. “It’s not fair, we never play anymore!”

“He’s kicked me out,” the dark boy is whispering. He’s standing on the back doorstep, Lily holding the door open with her mother standing behind her, one hand on her shoulder. “He says if I go away to school tomorrow, I can’t go back.”

“Eileen will change his mind,” Mrs Evans says. “In you come, lad. We’ll take you up to Kings Cross with us in the morning.”

Petunia watches her mother stand aside, letting the horrible boy in and Petunia wants to tell her not to do it. That he only brings trouble.

Petunia glares at his tear-stained face, hates the way Lily pulls him into a close hug.

"Everything will be better there," Lily whispers to him.

"It better be," the boy whispers into her sister's hair. Petunia wants to cut it all off, just so he will never touch it again.

"I don't like him, don't be stupid," the dark boy scoffs, kicking his feet against the dust under the swings in the park. They're back for their first summer and Petunia has barely set eyes on Lily. The boy is there, all the time.

"Remus is really nice, Sev," Lily says. "I think you're sweet together."

"Maybe," the boy mutters. "It's boring in Slytherin without you."

Petunia sees the sad longing in his face. Hates him, because how can he possibly be lonely, when he took her only sister from her?

Petunia is walking in the sunshine by the river. She's trying to stay away from the house, from Lily at the height of her second summer back from school, from her parents who are so brutally proud. She hears voices under the willow tree.

"I can't believe you came all the way to visit me," a low voice whispers, one that she'd recognise anywhere. The voice of the boy who stole her sister. Petunia's face darkens. She peers into the shadows.

"It's not that far from Llandrindod Wells on the Knight bus," a fair boy with scars across his face whispers back. "Besides. I missed you."

Petunia watches the dark boy kiss the fair boy and feels her stomach churn in disgust.

"Quiet, Sev, Tuney might come in."

Petunia peers through the crack at Lily's open bedroom door. There are books scattered on the floor with the odd acronym, O.W.L.S on them, snow on the windowpane. On the bed, Lily and the dark boy are sitting side by side, leaning against the wall. He's in a green and silver jumper and he's grown about three feet, it looks like. Lily is wearing that horrible red and gold jumper and leaning up to kiss him.

"Lily!" Petunia shrieks, throwing open the door. "Don't!"

They both jump apart.

"Holy fucking Hades," the dark boy rolls his eyes. "Hello, Tuney."

"Don't you speak to me, you - you pervert!"

The boy says nothing, just rolls his eyes again and climbs off the bed, walking to the door.

"I'll make brews," he mutters.

"Thanks, Sev," Lily turns on her sister as the door closes. "What's your problem?"

"He tried to kiss you!" Petunia glares at Lily, hating her confidence, her sparkling eyes, her odd jumpers and scarves. "You know he's a pervert, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"He kisses boys!" Petunia hisses. "It's gross, it's disgusting, it's - it's unnatural!"

"I don't think it is," Lily says quietly. "I don't think it's your business either."

Lily is sitting on her bedroom floor, books all around her. Petunia stares down at the picture of the boy in the frame. He has dark hair and a strong face and a smile that looks wildly merry. It is not that awful boy from Spinners End. In fact, Petunia's not seen him since last Christmas. Last summer was the first summer Lily was alone. Petunia was hurt that it made not a bit of difference. Her sister was still a stranger.

"Who's that?" Petunia demands, poking the photograph with her toe.

"I am trying to study for my finals," Lily flicks a piece of red hair out of her face. "They start in May."

"Finals in daisy flying?" Petunia snaps. Lily doesn't even look up.

"Go away," she mutters, highlighting something in a book. Petunia hates that she is still so academic. It isn't fair, that the sister who got all the magic is also the one with the keenest mind, but nothing has been fair for years.

"Who is he?" Petunia picks up the picture. It's one of those odd, moving photographs and Petunia looks at it queasily as the boy winks and ruffles his wavy hair.

"My boyfriend," Lily snatches it back, eyes flaring brightly the way they always do when she's annoyed.

"What happened to ... that boy?" Petunia sneers. "Is this one a pervert too?"

Lily looks at Petunia darkly for a moment, so darkly Petunia actually takes a step back. For a minute, the red-haired fierce-eyed girl on the floor looks nothing like the sister she grew up with.

"Don't talk to me about Severus ever again," Lily says.

Petunia and Lily sit opposite one another in a coffee shop near Charing Cross. It's snowing outside and their clothes are damp, steaming slightly. There are Christmas lights in the window.

"You're married," Petunia says flatly. She stares at the ring on her sister's hand. A ruby big enough to choke on. Petunia hates the ease of her sister's new wealth.

"So are you," Lily replies. "How's Vernon?"

Petunia is glad her gloves cover her own more modest diamond and ring. She tells herself she wouldn't want it anyway. Too gaudy. Everything about that world is gaudy and abnormal.

"Why am I here?" Petunia asks.

"I'm pregnant," Lily says, turning her coffee cup on its saucer. "We've been trying and ... now I am."

Petunia will not tell her that she is also pregnant, that she's probably further along. She won't feel the sting of the fact that she and her only sister are both pregnant and yet are literally worlds apart.

"Congratulations," Petunia says coldly. "Is it his?"

Lily gives her a horrible look, so horrible that Petunia almost regrets it.

"How can you ask me that?" She says.

"How can you not answer?" Petunia snaps.

"I don't owe you an answer."

Lily won't look her in the eye.

"I always knew he would do this to you," Petunia doesn't need to say his name. "Always."

Lily doesn't answer. Petunia knows it is true. She wants to crow over her sister with bitter delight for her foolishness but also rip all of her own hair out and scream until she is hoarse, because the dark boy is always doing this, always making his presence known, even in this.

"I have to go away," Lily says quietly. "There's a war and we need to be safe for the baby."

"Fine."

"That's it?" Lily snorts and shakes her head. "Heartfelt."

"What do I have to lose?" Petunia stands up. "A sister? I lost her to that damned boy years ago."

Lily's eyes flash dangerously and Petunia glares at the way her sister's hand rests protectively against her abdomen. Why is it her sister is only ever so fierce for him?

"I told you," Lily says lowly. "I told you never to talk to me about -,"

"Don't worry," Petunia sneers. "I never speak of Severus bloody Snape if I can ever help it."

Petunia stands over the grave, glaring down at the sweet peas that have been left. Her parents are both gone and Petunia is grateful, at least, she does not have to live with their grief for their golden

daughter and favoured son-in-law. Sweet peas were Lily's favourites and everyone who knows that is dead. Except for one. She sees footprints in the soft mud. She turns and looks over her shoulder, following them to a shadowed man under a tree by the gate. She knows who it is. He's been hiding on the edges as long as she's known him, sneaking in where he's not wanted and the stoop in his shoulders is the same as it was when he was twelve. She thinks of the toddler she has at home who has his measured frown, his solemn movements, his concentrated stare into the middle distance. The witches and wizards can cover it up with white skin and Lily's eyes but Petunia knows. She sees the child and sees him too, the dark boy who took her sister. Her grief is fresh, raw and gnawing for all the lost years but she knows that the solemn dark haired child is all she has left of her sister. She will not give that to Severus Snape too.

Harry sways, gasping for breath. He stumbles against the table of Petunia's mind.

"How dare you?" Petunia whispers, and he sees a version of her form across the table from him. She is as she was the last time she thought of Severus; in the graveyard, younger, taut with grief and fury, holding a bunch of lilies. Harry is shaking. He is full of magic. He is full of pain.

She knew. She knew. She knew.

"How dare I?" Harry chokes out. Petunia is completely unmoved by his distress, by his trembling body and the magic pulsing out of his hands. "You - you kept my father away from me!"

"She was my sister," Petunia snarls. "Mine! And you turned out to be all *his*. I don't owe you anything."

"No, you do," Harry swallows back bile and sets his hands down on the table. *Everything. Every single memory. Bring them to me. Bring them.* "You owe me the memories you have of my parents."

"I'm not giving you anything," Petunia whispers.

"I'm not asking."

Harry gathers each memory in his hand, holds them softly like liquid silver as they flow to the edges trying to escape his grasp. The memories he's seen and the ones he hasn't. Everything that Petunia remembers of Severus, Harry is holding in his hands. *Magic is ninety percent what, Harry?* He's sure this isn't what Magnus or Bill had in mind, but he pauses. He makes himself think. *What do I want to happen?* Harry takes a deep breath and thinks of deleting things on a computer screen in primary school, thinks of turning mirrors into molten sand in the room of requirement. A memory charm is just forgetting and Harry wants more. *I will rip them out of her.* He thinks of the words, of what they could be and when he has them, he knows.

"*Obliterate,*" Harry hisses in parseltongue, pulling up the Prince magic. "*Oblivion.*"

The memories are a twist of light and shadows in his hands, sinking into him, the edges of Petunia's kitchen keening and bending around him to accommodate the utter obliteration of a million memories all ripped out of Petunia's mind and all sinking into Harry's.

"What have you done?" Petunia screams. "What have you *done*?"

“Justice,” Harry feels the shadows engulf him. Inside his mind, he feels the Black raven caw victoriously, hears the screech of the Potter griffin, even thinks he hears the distant hiss of the Slytherin magic and feels the snapping jaws of the Prince wolf, happy to consume forever.

You will bring justice, honoured Mage, the Black Prince whispers. *This is just the start.*

The force of the magic knocks Harry backwards and suddenly, a pair of arms are grabbing him. Real arms in the real world.

“Harry!” Theo catches him as he collapses against him. Harry’s head feels like it’s on fucking fire.

“Jesus, what did you do?” Harry looks up. Fred is looking at Petunia, who’s flopped to the floor like a rag doll. “Some necromancy thing?”

Harry turns away from Theo and throws up.

“Just breathe,” Theo mutters, rubbing his back. “You’re okay.”

Harry does not feel okay.

“How long?” Harry chokes, wincing against the slimy, acidic taste in his mouth.

“Nearly forty minutes.”

Forty minutes. Forty minutes in Petunia’s mind. *No wonder I feel so fucking sick.*

“Which is why we need to go,” George looks at his watch. “In ten minutes you can’t be here, Harry, or the DMLE will arrest you. We need to get out and cover our tracks.”

Do what’s necessary and get the hell out.

“Wake her up,” Harry gasps, wiping his mouth on his jumper and knowing that he has to face what he’s done. “Now!”

“*Ennervatae,*” Fred mutters, pointing his wand at Petunia. She shudders and gasps awake. Harry staggers forward and she flinches away from him.

“What did you do?” Petunia gasps. “What - why -?”

“Who was the boy?” Harry demands harshly, holding onto Theo for support and staring into Petunia’s limp blue eyes. “The boy who lived down at Spinners End, when you were growing up?”

“What boy? There was no boy at Spinners End!” Petunia scrambles back from Harry, clutching at Vernon.

“Who’s my Dad?” Harry yells.

“That horrible boy, James Potter!” Petunia glares up at him furiously. “What did you do to me?”

“Shit, Harry,” George breathes.

“Fucking hell,” Theo’s breath is coming fast as Harry slumps against him. “You - you took her memories.”

Harry falls back in relief and also terror. *It worked. Holy shit, it worked.* Petunia groans and presses her hand to her head. He wonders if her headache is anything like as bad as his and finds he doesn’t care. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, reaching for the comforting chill of the shadows of the Prince magic. He tightens Severus’ tether slightly, feels it shiver, knows that somewhere, Severus is aware of him. He hears Petunia’s fierce accusation: *you were just like him.* Harry knows how to be like Severus right now. *Negahbane raaz - Guard the secrets.*

“Harry?” Theo whispers.

“Oblivate them all,” Harry says harshly. “They can’t know Theo was here, they can’t tell anyone, ever.”

“Of course,” George takes his wand back. “Are you okay?”

Harry doesn’t answer. He marches over to Petunia.

“Now,” he says to George.

“*Oblivate,*” George whispers quickly casts a memory charm and Petunia’s eyes are unfocused for a moment. Then when they refocus, there is a familiar dislike in them.

“You,” she whispers, mouth twisted with distaste as she stares at Harry.

“Me,” Harry tries to keep all of his magic in his hand and not send it swirling into Petunia’s body. *Do what is necessary and get the hell out.* “You’ve got twelve months.”

“What?” Petunia widens her eyes.

“I’ve given you twelve months before they come for you,” Harry’s voice is cold. He thinks of Petunia standing over his mother’s grave. *He was right there. My sire. My father. He was right there. She let him walk away.* “I don’t give a fuck what you do, I’m just telling you. You’ll never hear from me or anyone to do with me unless it’s from *your* government -,” Harry thinks about the evidence that Severus has been collecting and the case Remus will be starting to build with his memories. *I’ll let them do it.* “- anyone who turns up and says they’re wixen and their with me is lying because I’m never coming back to you and, let’s be honest, they’re probably going to kill you and I don’t care if they do. I’m just telling you what’s going to happen. You’ve got twelve months.”

Petunia gasps and faints but Harry doesn’t care. He stands up and looks at Fred and George.

“Clean Vernon up,” he says. “After we leave the house go to Figgy’s. Tell her we’re done and I’m never coming back. Tell her to move, if she can. She’s not going to be safe here. No one in the Order should come here anymore.”

“Sure,” Fred says. “We’ll get a message to Dumbledore.”

“I don’t care what he says,” Harry stares at the bars on the windows. *He left me here.* “Anyone who’s with me won’t come here. No one, and I mean *no one,*” Harry’s voice trembles. “In the

family of Black or Potter is going to protect this house, is going to watch this house, is going to set foot in this house ever again. We're done, okay? It's enough. I'm done."

There is magic in his hands, magic in his words. It's not a compulsion, it's a promise. The light in his hand spirals outwards and into the walls. They tremble in agreement, the magic settling.

"It's okay," Theo is there, stroking the back of his left hand tenderly. "You're right. It's enough."

"More than enough," Fred nods. "I'll tell Bill. If Dumbledore wants to watch these twats that's his lookout."

Harry smiles shortly. He picks up the odd hourglass, the only thing left in the room. He stares at the bars on the window.

"Rip them out," he says shortly, gestures a trembling hand to the door. "The padlocks and cat flap too."

"It would be my pleasure," George says, gently taking his wand back from Harry. He twists it in a complicated motion for a second and searing heat appears around the edges of the window. The glass smashes. The bars tumble out. As George turns his attention to the cat flap Harry looks at Fred.

"The cupboard under the stairs," Harry swallows. "Tear it apart."

Fred's eyes darken.

"Yes, milord," Fred says.

"When you're done, come back up. There's something I need to do before we go, it'll ... it'll cover all the magic. No one will know what we did."

"Excellent." Fred grins and disappears and minutes later, Harry hears Dudley yelling:

"What the fuck are you doing to our cupboard?"

Then there is the sound of a small explosion and hearing it is like a release. He winces and sighs, all at once, closing his eyes. Inside his mind, he sees the blasted door hanging off its hinges. He sees the ragged sign saying 'Harry's room,' shredded into nothing. *It's enough.* Harry opens his eyes. George is lazily causing all the screws around the cat flap to unwind whilst Theo methodically pries his knife under the padlocks and wrenches them away from the splintering wood with satisfaction on his taut face. Harry watches through half-lidded eyes, his head feels like it's going to explode. *One more thing to do. Just one more thing and I'm done.* Harry takes a deep breath as he hears Fred running back up the stairs.

"I've obliviated Dudders," he says breathlessly. "They'll wake up and Dudley will think he smelled gas. They'll think it's a gas leak."

"I'm done too," George says.

"Thank you," Harry looks at them both wearily for a second. He remembers the car in second year. "For always rescuing me."

"Ever at your service," Fred bows low with a grin. George ruffles his hair tenderly.

“Littlest brother,” he says fondly. “Little Lord brother.”

“What do you need?” Theo asks quietly, standing beside Harry and rubbing his back.

“My wand,” Harry sighs. Even though Remus said he’d need to use a wand for this, he wishes he didn’t have to. His own wand still feels so unfamiliar in his hand. Fred presents his instead.

“Use mine, Harry.”

“What I’m going to do is going to scrub, like, the magical footprint,” Harry says. “It doesn’t matter if it’s mine.”

“Don’t take the risk,” Fred urges the wand into Harry’s hand. “Just in case.”

“Just in case? If it does go wrong I don’t want to implicate you -,”

“Guardsmen,” Fred says firmly. “Now get on with it, milord.”

“Listen to him,” Theo says. Harry sighs and takes Fred’s wand. It tingles just like George’s did and Harry takes a deep breath and looks at it in his right hand: *only borrowing, is that okay?* The tingles die down. Harry wonders if its totally fucking weird that he’s talking to wands or if it’s actually completely on par for everything that’s happened today, but he turns to Theo and nods at his knife.

“I need some blood,” he says. Theo raises his eyebrows but gently rolls up Harry’s t-shirt cuff. He then wordlessly presses the sharp tip of his knife against the Wormtail cut that never fully heals.

“*Shit,*” Harry hisses softly to himself, trying to ignore the memory that always surfaces: *a bubbling cauldron, a skull like face*. He clamps his shaking left hand over the wound, letting the blood douse his fingers.

“I don’t know exactly what this will, like, feel like in the room,” Harry says. “So stand back.”

Then he sets them against the floorboard, drawing the shape of the rune as Remus taught him, whispering the words of the spell in latin.

“That’s a time rune,” George says above him. Harry glances up and sees his eyes following Harry’s fingers with interest. “These are blood runes.”

“Dark,” Fred grins. “And so wicked.”

“*Aufero, depello, sevoco ...*”

“That’s ... ‘steal,’ ‘expel,’ ‘withdraw,’” Theo whispers behind Harry. He’s glad Theo is there because there’s pressure building inside his fingertips and he can see that the wood under the blood is starting to smoke. *This is going to fucking hurt*. Harry takes a deep breath and keeps going.

“*Deflagrare, creatio ardet, sanguis meus ardet ...* Ah, fuck!”

The rune ignites, burning brightly into the wooden floor and Harry slaps a hand over his left bicep, dropping Fred’s wand to the floor. Fred zooms to catch it, dodging a spiral of flame that leaps up nearly as tall as him.

“Harry! What -?” Theo’s fingers pull Harry’s away and the four of them stare as the rune burning in the floor begins to hiss, as if it is sucking all the air out of the room and at the same time, the patch of Harry’s forearm starts to burn, as if the rune is slowly being drawn onto his skin with a hot poker.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Harry moans, pressing his head against Theo’s shoulder.

“What is it going to -?” Before Fred can finish his sentence there is an explosion of heat from the centre of the rune, a blasting, rushing, wind of hot air that ricochets through the house. Fred and George stumble back, swearing as Theo grips Harry tightly. Downstairs, Dudley shrieks and by the door, Vernon and Petunia stir. There is a corresponding pain in Harry’s arm and he grunts, trying not to fall.

“Ow, ow, fucking ow,” Harry mumbles, feeling as if his arm has been given its own private crucio.

“Who the fuck taught you that?” Theo demands, absently patting the back of Harry’s head as his eyes fix on the rune burn curiously. “You don’t even take Runes!”

“Remus,” Harry mumbles. “Wanker.”

“Did it work?” Theo asks. George rummages in his pocket and pulls out something that looks a little bit like a muggle spirit level. Both he and Fred peer at it.

“Yep,” George says with a sigh of relief. “No signs of magic being cast here in the past two hours.”

“It’s not permanent,” Harry mumbles.

“Which is why it’s time for you to go,” Fred says firmly. “We’ll stay here just in case the DMLE turns up.”

“What?” Harry stares at them, hazily. “No, you should get out of here, don’t get caught.”

“Don’t worry about us,” George says with a grin. He pulls a t-shirt out of his back pocket that has the logo of British Gas embroidered on the breast pocket. “We’re going undercover. Got ourselves a nice muggle polyjuice knocked up.”

“Gas inspector and repair man, don’t you know,” Fred grins, pulling out a clipboard. “We’ll get the Ministry of the trail and make sure the muggles settle down. We’ll tell the Order too and make sure Dumbledore knows you’ve completed the vow.”

“Don’t worry about us,” George says, seeing Harry’s expression. “Death Eaters can’t get into the house because of your blood protection. We’ll apparate out from the back garden when we’re done.”

Harry is worried, but the exhaustion Remus warned him about is tumbling towards him and Theo is looking at the burn on his arm with an increasingly worried expression.

“We need to get some salve on this now,” Theo says sternly, pressing his heir ring to Harry’s elbow so that he feels a cool flutter of air, like a fine breeze softening the edges of the pain. “It’s time to go.”

“Yeah.”

Harry stares dazedly around the room. His bedroom. The rune in the floor is slowly fading. All of his stuff is gone. The bars are broken, the cat flap pulled apart and the padlocks ripped off. Harry's finally free. He doesn't know what to feel. Oddly, Dumbledore's words come back to him: *You are, as ever, courageous beyond measure*. Harry feels tears in his eyes and leans against Theo.

"We'll write," George says firmly. "Go, Harry. Don't look back."

Harry nods and turns away from them towards Theo, turns so his guardsmen can't see the tears that are flooding his cheeks as his Prince ring becomes visible and he activates the portkey. Because whatever Dumbledore says, number four was never, ever home and it took more than courage to live here. It took everything. It took so much that Harry thinks he is hollowed out and as he twists through time and space, he thinks he might just float away if he wasn't being held so strongly by Theo. When he stumbles back against reality and smells a familiar scent of burnt sage and rosemary, he lets himself collapse and think one word: *Home*.

"Harrison. Mr Nott. You are early and ... unexpected," Severus voice is filled with worry and annoyance but also, undoubtedly, relief. Harry can feel him near enough and struggles blindly to grab his arm. Severus' firm hands take hold of him, moving automatically to support his weight. "What happened?"

"Dursley happened," Theo says shortly.

"But the blood protection -,"

"It's fine, it's charged, Harry can leave and we needed to leave. Urgently." Harry can feel how much Theo is aching to be alone with him, to make sure he's okay, but Harry knows he needs to talk to Severus first. *He has to know*.

"Do you ... Penseive?" Harry mumbles at Severus. His arms are warm as he is holding Harry up and Harry hears him hesitate.

"Harry, your arm," Theo presses worriedly.

"Harry!" He smells Remus, creature magic soaring, and hears thunderous footsteps on what sounds like stairs. Harry opens his eye a crack and sees that they are all standing on the middle landing, Remus at the top of the bottom staircase, looking at Harry with wild, worried eyes.

"Very much," Harry says sarcastically, glaring at his godfather. "You said your rune hurt ' *Very much*. ' Couldn't have elaborated on that, could you? Maybe told me it feels like having your fucking arm burned off?"

"You used it," Remus sighs and closes his eyes.

"Are you mad?" Harry asks shakily.

"No," Remus opens his eyes. They are orange with fire. "Not at you."

Harry remembers then that despite the rune and the pain in his arm, Remus has so many new and horrible things to be mad at the Dursleys about. Things that he absolutely must explain to Severus before anything else happens. He grips Severus' robes even tighter.

"Penseive," he says firmly, swallowing down the pain.

“Harry -,”

“Now,” Harry swivels his eyes to stare at Theo, grabbing Theo’s hand and hissing in parseltongue. “*I have to tell him now.*”

“Tell me what?” Severus says quietly. Harry winces. Like an idiot, he forgot that his right hand is held in Severus’ right hand, their tethers and Prince rings close enough to hear parseltongue. Theo’s jaw is tight but he nods. Harry sighs and stares up into Severus eyes, letting words form in his mind, ready to be read by the legilimens: *something bad*. Severus doesn’t move or change his expression, but he looks immediately towards Remus.

“Lupin, I have a fresh pain reliever in stasis,” Severus says. “Can you oversee Mr Nott as he completes it for Harrison? It shall only take ten minutes.”

Theo looks at Harry who nods, wearily. Brewing right now will probably be good for Theo.

“Of course,” Harry smells Remus closer and then feels a warm kiss brushing against his forehead. “Hot chocolate later.”

“Sure, Rems,” Harry feels like his feet are made of lead. He leans against Severus as Theo passes him, squeezing his hand briefly and affectionately.

“I’ll make sure Granger is alright and send Kreacher to get Sahara,” Theo whispers. “It’ll be okay.”

Harry doesn’t know if Theo is referring to his endless tiredness, his burnt arm or how Severus Snape is going to react to the news that Petunia Dursley knowingly kept his child from him for fifteen years.

“Penseive?” Harry croaks.

“This way.”

Severus guides him into the bedroom. Harry tries not to notice the mingled scent of his two parents around them, woodsmoke and burnt sage, as Severus guides him to sit on the bed. Thank God its made and the blankets are pulled all the way up, but it’s still odd to see Remus’ pyjamas folded on a pillow and Severus’ book on the bedside table.

“No matter how bad you think it is, I must see to your health first,” Severus says. He reaches into the top drawer of the beside table and pulls out a small purple tub. “Show me the rune.”

Harry twists slightly and hisses through his teeth as Severus applies the purple gel that smells of aloe vera over the raw, burned skin. Severus’ face is unreadable as he looks at it intensely.

“It is on the same arm as Lupin’s,” he says quietly.

“Maybe it always takes this arm,” Harry says.

“Yes,” Severus looks up at him sharply. “Which is why you should never cast it again. It expect it would burn the same place every time.”

“Motherfucker,” Harry says, feeling queasy at the idea of enduring that hot poker of magic blistering already burnt and bloody skin.

“Language,” Severus mutters and Harry smirks. It’s very fun, suddenly, to imagine Vernon Dursley, swearing and blathering at Harry only to be met but Severus’ curt and cold single-word rebuke. *Language, Dursley, and disembowelling flobberworms for a week.* Harry chuckles dazedly to himself. *I’d pay good money to watch him do that.* “You wish to show me a memory?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, watching as Severus stands to put the pot of balm away and lifts a pensieve out from the lower cupboard section of the bedside table.

“Do you need assistance?” Severus asks. Harry nods weakly and Severus places his wand at Harry’s temple. Harry thinks of his conversation with Petunia, of everything that happened inside her memories. He lets it all go and soon, Severus is guiding silver threads of memories into the Pensieve. Severus’ face tightens as he looks down at the surface of the Pensieve. “I shall be but a moment.”

Harry lets himself flop back down on the bed, sighing as he stares at the ceiling. The burn salve is cooling his arm down, so now it feels only numb and tingly in a kind of pleasant way. His head hurts less lying down, even if the softness of the mattress makes him want to close his eyes and sleep for two days. To keep himself awake, he idly stares around the room. He’s never been in Severus and Remus’ bedroom before. Severus’ side is tidy, Harry sees, his dressing gown hanging on the bed post, his slippers under the edge of the bed. Remus’ is organised but cluttered, too many clothes hung over the edge of the wardrobe door, too many papers and books piled up on the bedside table. Harry wonders if this is what all couples bedrooms look like (what all parents bedrooms look like) an odd assortment of objects that suggest things of a private life that Harry knows nothing about. *Do they read at night? Do they talk about me? Who wakes up first in the morning?* These questions are like gentle curiosities inside Harry’s mind and he quietly and contentedly considers them until the moment Severus appears out of the Pensieve. His face is ashen. He looks folds his arms and looks down at Harry.

“Explain to me what you think you did,” he says quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry breathes through his nose, trying to swallow down a wave of sudden sickness. *Oh shit, yeah, I did something I can’t explain. Again.*

“You do not need to apologise, but I do need to understand,” Severus says.

“I ... I wanted to make her forget you,” Harry closes his eyes against the sting behind his eyes. “So I ... I used the intention stuff Bill and Magnus were teaching me. I thought about what I wanted to happen and ... it did.”

“You did not cast a memory charm.”

“I know,” Harry swallows heavily. He wonders if he is going to throw up again.

“Why?”

“She didn’t deserve to have those memories anywhere inside her,” Harry clenches his hands into fists but tries, really hard, not to feel angry. *Tom is the last fucking thing I need right now.* “I didn’t want anyone, not Tom, not Dumbledore, not even you, to be able to find any trace of you in her mind. So I ... I ...”

“You took them. Without her permission.” Severus’ voice is oddly neutral. Harry doesn’t know whether to be relieved or worried. “I do not think anyone has ever conceived of memory adaptation

in this way. Using legilimency is ... unprecedented.”

“I just ... I couldn’t let her keep them,” Harry whispers. “Did you - did you see what she said to me?”

“Yes.” Harry opens his eyes and looks up at his sire. Severus’ face is blank. “I did.”

“She knew,” Harry gulps and fights against his churning stomach. “She ... always knew.”

“It seems she did.”

Harry can understand the cold detachment in Severus’ voice, can see the tension in his arms and hands. He is a man who wears rage in dangerous stillness, in quietness and tension so deadly and precise that at any moment, Harry feels sure he could rip the world apart with his fury. Harry knows what that feels like.

“How?” Harry whispers. “I ... the blood protection glamour, it’s meant to be complete, right? I mean, how could she even -?”

“There are different types of blood adoptions,” Severus says tautly. “Adoptions to acknowledge and adoptions to conceal are the most popular. If I had to guess, I would say yours was to conceal. Blood adoptions are built on secrecy, the goblins keep the ins and outs of the process closely guarded, but charms theorists suggests that part of the power depends on no one knowing the truth of the concealed parent. It is ... possible that because Petunia always suspected you were not James Potter’s child, as she insinuated in the memory you saw, she could, sometimes, see past the glamour.”

“And that’s why she didn’t care or notice when I changed,” Harry says quietly. “Last summer, she couldn’t give a fuck, and I literally changed race overnight. It’s because she’d always ... she’d always seen me that way.”

Other things begin to make sense. Horrible things. *You filthy, dirty freak!* Harry sits up, vomit rising in his throat.

“I think I’m going to -,” Harry takes a shuddering breath, leaning forwards.

“Harrison? What is it?”

Harry cannot possibly say it so he just looks into Severus’ eyes, leaving the memory there for Severus to find. *Harry is seven, kneeling on the floor of the bathroom, naked and stinging, whilst Petunia makes him scrub with bleach. “Filthy, dirty freak!”*

Severus takes a sharp breath in through his nose and reaches into his robes, pulling out that trusty anti-emetic potion that Harry quickly gulps down, thankful for the taste of peppermint and ginger.

“You did nothing wrong,” Severus’ voice is low and dark and Harry thinks he sees trembling darkness around his Prince ring, as if he is struggling to hold back the nothing-place. “You were none of those things.”

“Did you see her, that day?” Harry croaks out. “At the grave, did you -?”

“Yes,” Severus’ eyes are very dark. “I did not approach out of respect. I regret that.”

Three words, holding so much. *I regret that*. Regret that Severus didn't ask, regret that Petunia didn't say, regret that they'd hated each other for so fucking long, that Petunia was such an endless bloody bitch that she'd decided to keep Harry out of some kind of shitty feud.

"If she ... if she had asked you -," Harry closes his eyes against the burn of his headache. It's stupid to ask, it's stupid to even think it, but he can't seem to stop talking. *Maybe its the exhaustion from the rune*. "If she'd told you what she knew, if she'd said she didn't want me would you have -?"

"Yes," Severus' voice is short.

"How can you be sure?" Harry whispers. He can't stop a tear sliding down his cheek. It feels like he's been crying constantly since Theo showed up yesterday and he doesn't know how to stop. "You hated me, you hated James, you didn't know I was yours and she wouldn't have told you and you'd left me behind once before -,"

"Harrison," Severus cuts across him. Harry takes a shuddering breath and stops speaking. "I would have taken you, even to give you to Lupin, if I was unsure of Petunia's claims or unable to see past my own despair. I would have. No one in their right mind would think Petunia Evans a suitable guardian of a Wixen child."

"Except Dumbledore," Harry mutters.

"I would have taken you," Severus repeats. "If she had asked."

But she didn't, and instead of growing up with someone who wanted me, I grew up with someone who hated my living guts.

Harry nods, throat too tight to speak. Another tear slips down his cheek and he flops backwards again, the duvet soft under his head and filled comfortingly, with the mingled scent of burnt sage and woodsmoke.

"Well then," he manages to gulp out. "It wasn't all your fault then, was it?"

He doesn't look at Severus as he moves slowly and sits on the bed beside Harry. He closes his eyes and lets the tears fall, just like he did in the hospital wing after the Department of Mysteries.

"None of it was your fault either, *farzandam*," Severus whispers.

Harry takes a shuddering breath and nods. The tears keep falling. It's weird. A year ago, he would have jumped in front of the Hogwarts Express rather than cry in front of Severus. Now, it feels normal. *Safe*.

"I hate her," he sniffs. "She ... she ... *used* me."

"To hate me," Severus' voice is gravelly. "Yes, she did."

"I don't get it," Harry shakes his head, fiercely, "I don't get it. She fell out with my Mum, whatever, but Mum ... Mum loved me, she loved you once, if Petunia missed Mum so much -,"

"She did not miss Lily," Severus' voice is sharp. "She missed a version of Lily that never came to exist. A muggle version."

"She wanted me to be muggle too," Harry swallows hard. "But I was too much like you."

“Like your mother, too,” Severus says. “Harrison, look at me.”

Harry does, reluctantly, trying to blink back tears and sniffing loudly. Severus is looking down at him with a ferocious expression. Severus is not affectionate really, not like Remus is, but this look that he has, this look like he will murder anyone who hurts Harry, it makes something soft and warm flower in Harry’s mind. Not comfort, exactly, but the feeling that he can step back and let someone fight instead.

“Lily had been showing signs of magic since she was an infant. You were not too much like me. You were too much like an ordinary wixen child.”

“If that’s true, why was Petunia so ...” Harry swallows. “Why did she hate me for being magical if Mum had been magical too?”

“Those early instances of Lily’s accidental magic were hidden from Petunia, her parents rightly afraid and concerned about how they could protect both of their children.” Severus speaks slowly, measuring each word. “There is a reason that when young Wixen are identified, a representative from the Ministry of Magic or Hogwarts is sent to their home. They help muggle parents negotiate all aspects of having a wixen child, they help them ensure the statute of secrecy, they guide them in how to address it with siblings. Petunia had none of that. Instead, I brought the truth of magic crashing into their lives.”

“You were her friend,” Harry whispers. “Petunia was jealous.”

“Harrison, I do not say any of this by way of giving the woman an excuse,” Severus’ voice was sharp. “I do not regret my friendship with your mother or anything that came after -,”

“Including me?” Harry mumbles.

“Especially you,” Severus says.

Harry breathes out slowly.

“I only say this so that you can see Petunia’s hatred was not rational.” Severus’ voice softens. “It was not logical, it was not because you were magical or disobedient or unnatural, it was and is, because a very long time ago, her sister hurt her by choosing a direction for her life that Petunia could not and would not abide.”

“Does that make you hate her?” Harry asks bluntly.

“Perhaps more than any other living being,” Severus’ voice is deadly quiet.

“Me too,” Harry says. It’s saying something, he thinks, that both he and Severus hate Petunia the most. They’ve got a long and well populated list of people to hate, though Harry isn’t quite sure if Severus would be saying that if Sirius was still alive. Still, having number two billing after Sirius Black and before Tom Riddle on Severus’ list is a pretty high scoring for Petunia. For the first time ever, Harry realises that he hates Petunia more than Vernon. Whatever can be said about Vernon and Harry can say a lot, Vernon didn’t plot. He didn’t choose to keep Harry, he was stuck with Harry as much as Harry was stuck with him. Petunia is different. Petunia chose.

Freak. Abnormal. Unnatural. You’re just like him, that awful boy.

“ I just ...” Harry blinks back more tears. “She never asked you.”

“No.”

“She should have asked.”

Harry feels Severus hesitate and then, ever so gently, feels a long fingers brush a curl away from his forehead.

“I know, *farzandam*. I know. ”

Harry doesn't need to look up into Severus' face. He can hear it all in Severus' voice, the same broken-hearted regret when Severus had told Dumbledore, on that windy hill when he turned spy all those years ago, that he would do anything to protect Lily. Harry closes his eyes and breathes slowly and lets his sire, that awful boy, his awful father, stroke his hair and make him feel just a little bit better. Just a little bit wanted. *Too little, too late*, a nasty voice inside of him says, a voice that actually sounds like Petunia. Harry ignores it. After all, he's in no position to turn down kindness coming little or late or otherwise. Besides, he never has to listen to Petunia ever again.

“Never again,” Harry mutters, his words slippery with weariness. “She never gets to keep me ever again.”

“Never again,” Severus repeats and when he says the words, they sound like a promise. Harry thinks it's strange, that this is exactly what Petunia hated, didn't want, the very reason she never took Harry to Severus, never spoke to him in the graveyard. Harry knows he should ask if Petunia was right and Severus did kill his father, but he finds he doesn't care. *If I knew I could kill Vernon and get away with it, I would have done.*

“Well,” Harry sighs, squeezing his eyes so tears roll down his cheeks and into his ears. *No more Petunia, ever again.* “ One horrible dictator down ...”

“Indeed,” Harry thinks he hears a smile in Severus' voice. “You have a one hundred percent success rate.”

Harry smirks.

“Lucky me.”

There's an odd swell of pride inside Harry. Petunia may have taken her pain out on Harry in a million tiny horrible ways over what felt like endless fucking years, but she's lost in the end. Because here he is, exactly where she tried to ensure he would never be: returned to Severus Snape.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Draco's Task

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Referenced child abuse/referenced child sexual abuse/referenced sexual abuse).

Lots of people panicked about the "referenced sexual child abuse" tag. It was added after a request was made following a chapter that went into some of the detail of what Voldemort takes from some of his followers (Chapter 14). Voldemort, as we know, recruits young. Non-consensual sex with a person under the age of 18 is child sexual abuse, hence the tag. It has relevancy for other upcoming parts of the story but the tag does not impact the currently underage main characters. (Harry, Theo, and their contemporaries). I cannot say more without spoiling the story for you, but I hope it gives people some peace of mind.

This time, Narcissa's plan is tested.
Next time, Theo's got mail.

“I am going to kill her.”

“You’re not going to kill her.”

“I am.”

“You told me I couldn’t kill her, you told me it was Harry’s abuse and for him to choose -,”

“I am going to poison her very slowly.”

“Severus -,”

“Don’t tell me I am unreasonable until you’ve seen it,” Severus pauses in unbuttoning his shirt to point at the pensieve. “Now. Go.”

Lupin sighs and presses his face into the surface of the pensieve. Severus watches him disappear and then sighs, rubbing his hand over his face. It had been bad enough watching his son’s memories of his return to Privet Drive last night, seeing Petunia’s scorn first-hand and the evidence of her abuse all over that damn house; the locks on the doors and cupboards, the padlock and chain on the fridge. He has been cataloguing it meticulously, keeping himself distant, telling himself that all of this will be worth the viewing if Harrison gets to have his day in a court of law and prove his abuse. Severus had thought that would be enough to make some kind of justice and settle his pure rage towards Petunia because it was Harrison’s justice to bring. Now Severus knows differently and is struggling with every breath to control his rage. *She knew. She fucking knew, the absolute bitch, I wish I could watch her squirm under the Dark Lord’s wand.* By the time Severus has taken off his shirt and pulled on a pair of pyjama trousers, Lupin is tumbling back out of the pensieve. He looks at Severus with very bright, amber eyes.

“I did tell you that you could not kill her,” Severus says drily. Lupin isn’t listening, he is clenching and unclenching his fists and Severus suddenly worries for his walls.

“She knew, or she at least suspected,” Lupin whispers. “All this time.”

“Yes.” Severus peels off his socks. It’s unthinkable but at the same time, undoubtedly Petunia. She always was one for the long game.

“How is Harry?”

“As well as can be expected,” Severus says. The child has been taking headache potions all day and sleeping off the pain upstairs with Theodore reading by his side, like a literary sentinel. The serpent arrived in the afternoon though Severus didn’t see how, no doubt pulled through time and space by Harrison’s odd familiar magic, and the elf is in residence in the kitchen, no doubt cooking more treacle tarts. Severus has not missed them. The sickly scent of golden syrup permeates all of his soft furnishings, no matter what he brews. Bane will return tomorrow and the house will once again be full. Severus is not looking forward to it.

“How are you?” Lupin sits on Severus’ side of the bed, face full of pity and rage.

“It does not matter,” Severus looks away from Lupin’s amber eyes. “I have him now. I won.”

“At terrible cost,” Lupin says.

That is how I win anything, Severus thinks bleakly.

“Yes.”

“Do you know how he did it?” Lupin asks. “How he ... well, I couldn’t understand the parseltongue he used but it seems like he completely disintegrated the memories, or - or absorbed them? But it wasn’t replication, he took them out of her memory -,”

Lupin’s understanding seems as adequate as Severus’ under these circumstances.

“He didn’t want her to have any memory of me,” Severus sighs. “So he took them.”

“Has anyone ever done that?”

“Not that I’ve heard of,” Severus shakes his head. Severus has been thinking it over in the hours since Harrison told him. “There are superior legilimens in Japan who have some very covert techniques, so it is possible ...”

“But it is also possible our child just completely changed the world of mind-magics?”

It is increasingly likely that Harrison will transform any magical discipline he touches.

“Possibly.”

“Sweet Merlin,” Lupin sighs. He gets up and walks over to his side of the bed, sitting down heavily and leaning his head back against the headboard behind him. “Is this the reason for the headache?”

“I believe so, also he was performing the legilimency charm for nearly an hour,” Severus says. “It can be excruciating.”

“What’s the longest you have done it?”

“Three,” Severus says shortly. *Tobias, before his death.* “The longest I have seen the Dark Lord perform it is five.”

Five, horrifying hours. Marlene McKinnon was a member of the Order who had excellent occlumency shields. The Dark Lord broke them all. Severus watched and, in the end, even helped. Severus remembers how he pushed a memory of Marlene’s parents to the forefront of her mind, a meagre comfort, as he sorted through the wreckage the Dark Lord had done to her mindscape to find the location of her brother. It was mercy by then, his deliberate sorting of broken memories rather than the Dark Lord’s cold lancing of pain. Then she was dead and later, Peter McKinnon was too.

“Albus?”

“He does not invade one’s mind in such an obvious way,” Severus shakes his head. “His legilimency amounts to guerrilla warfare rather than an all-out assault on the mind.”

Severus doubts that Albus has ever needed more than a few minutes to find exactly what he wanted in a person’s mind. His talent is to always know exactly what question he wants the answer to, to slip in and out, unnoticed. Severus has always found it utterly distasteful.

“Is Harry going to be okay?” Lupin asks.

“I do not know,” Severus swallows. He remembers the child’s freely flowing tears. He has not cried so much in front of Severus since he was first returned, bruised and bloody, from the Department of Mysteries. “I think so. He is ... upset.”

“He wasn’t angry?”

“No.”

That perhaps would have been easier for Severus to watch. He has watched Harrison rage and whilst it can be terrifying, either the heat of the sun or the cold heart of the eye of a storm, he at least knows it shall blow out eventually. What he saw in his child as he lay on Severus’ bed with tears slipping helplessly down his cheeks was sorrow.

“That’s not good,” Lupin says flatly. Severus knows they are both thinking of the shard of glass on the beach in Skye. Of the daggers of ice in the basement, only held back by Bane, proving that half a Mage can be half as powerful against a whole one.

“No. It is not.”

Severus has invented more potions in the last year than he has in the last fifteen. Harrison’s needs, Harrison’s scars, have produced adaptations and tweaks and new breakthroughs in the art of potions (though Severus can publish none of them since someone might inquire what need he had of a potion to remove blood-quill scarring if he ever manages it) but Severus can invent nothing that will cure Harrison’s melancholy. He knows as well as anyone the limitations of his craft. It does not mean he does not curse it.

“Magnus is back from Wales tomorrow,” Lupin says. “He can help, and Theodore’s here too.”

“How long does Mr Nott intend to stay?” Severus is grateful for Weasley’s wards. The Dark Lord has long known Severus’ tendency to be elusive from other Wixen and has not cared since he has a unique way of always ensuring Severus comes when called, but Severus knows that Lucius is finding his summer hermit ways infuriating. His letters are increasingly curt in tone.

“I think until they go back to school.”

“That will not work.”

Severus does not think any of them will survive a summer where Theodore and Harrison share a bedroom for an extended period of time. Not if whatever Severus walked in on in Medea Nott’s old bedroom in Ireland is anything to go by. *Sweet Circe, I cannot possibly be expected to talk to this child about heart bonding.* Lupin, Severus thinks, is more likely to simply kill Theodore and have done with it than try and broach the subject of sexual relationships with their child.

“It’ll have to,” Lupin sighs. “At least they made up.”

“They were at odds?”

“Severus,” Lupin gives him an exasperated look. “Of course they were.”

Severus thinks of the journals, so frequently used for hourly correspondence and is honestly baffled. *How can two people who speak so much be at odds?*

“I do not know how you could possibly expect me to know that,” Severus says.

Lupin rolls his eyes and begins to unbutton his shirt. Severus reaches for his book and opens it at the page bookmarked by a sprig of rosemary, but finds his eyes drifting lazily to Lupin’s hands.

“We need to prepare for reporting Petunia and Vernon to the muggle authorities,” Lupin says.

“If Harrison wants to then we shall do it,” Severus says quietly. “It is Harrison’s abuse -,”

“It is his to decide, yes, I know,” Lupin says wearily. The wolf does not realise that Severus is saying it more as a mantra against his own murderous instincts than as a reminder for Lupin.

“He needs to be ready,” Severus says, remembering his child’s hesitation at any other time they have discussed it. Perhaps Petunia’s revelation might help push Harrison towards readiness. Hades knows Severus is more than ready. *If Harrison allows it, I will see that they lose their child just as they took mine.*

“I didn’t realise you told Lily about me, beforehand,” Lupin says suddenly, in a quiet but abrupt change of topic. “About us. When we were young.”

“Why would I not?” Severus closes his eyes. It is hard to look at Lupin in his bed and think of Lily. He finds he hears her knowing laughter more and more. *I think you’re sweet together.* “She was my best friend.”

“I suppose I always assumed you were waiting for her, that I was only a placeholder.”

Severus cracks an eye open to glare at Lupin, who is now standing and shrugging his white shirt off over his shoulders. The pale scars on his back catch in the low orange light cast by the bedside lamp. *Idiot wolf.*

“Self-deprecation is utterly unappealing, you surely know that.” Severus sneers. “Besides, if we are going to talk about placeholders -,”

“Don’t,” Lupin gives him a sharp glare as he pulls on an old t-shirt and sits back down on the bed beside him. “Not tonight.”

Severus closes his eyes again. They do not talk about Black. It is undoubtedly for the best. Yet Severus feels the need to offer something. Not comfort, but perhaps consolation.

“She was my best friend,” Severus says evenly. “You were something else.”

“You still fell in love with her. Later.”

Lupin can’t hide the edge to his voice, the words left unsaid: *you made a child together*. Severus opens his eyes. Lupin has a monograph open on his lap (*Neuro-atypical diagnoses in wixen children between the ages of 9-17 and late-stage magical development*) that he is clearly not reading. Severus reaches out a hand and traces the heavy scar on Lupin’s thigh from Bellatrix’s attack at the Ministry of Magic. It wasn’t Severus’ best work, but it is healing beautifully, the hollowing of the skin rising with daily handmade lotions. Lupin takes a long breath out, his muscles relaxing as Severus’ fingers begin to ease taut muscles around it that are overworking to accommodate the injury.

“What do you want, Remus?” Severus says. He is tired, especially tired today of all the ways he has failed the people he cares for. “I loved her, I loved Regulus, I loved you first. Tell me what you want.”

Lupin twists and kisses him, a little savagely, and Severus permits it. He even digs his fingers into the unhurt muscle of Lupin’s thigh.

“That,” Lupin breathes against his lips. “To know that you are mine, *cariad*.”

“I told you before, this language of mates and possession is utterly insipid,” Severus rolls his eyes and pushes Lupin gently away, denying the tingling on his lips. “Besides also being completely hypocritical, given how you reprimand the child for his possessive language.”

“He’s fifteen -,”

“He’s sixteen in two days.”

“Well done for remembering,” Lupin’s voice is a little caustic and Severus clicks his tongue in irritation. Lupin’s quick mouth is annoying, mainly because Severus finds it so damn appealing. “He’s fifteen and too quick to bond and takes possession of people in some way already. I am a thirty-something werewolf, possession is in my nature and I waited for my mate for twenty years. It is different.”

Severus will not let himself feel anything when Lupin refers to him that way. Nothing at all.

“Thirty-something?” Severus raises his eyebrows. “That’s oddly coy of you.”

“Perhaps I’ve already had too much of a reminder of how old I have become today.”

Lupin stares at the Pensieve in dislike. Severus understands. It is quite something, seeing your younger self. Recognising beauty and strength when you thought you had none, realising that the

days you spent thinking were the worst of your life may have actually been some of your softest and sweetest. That is the thing about war, Severus thinks. It steals away a future of possible better days.

"I never said thank you for coming to visit that summer," Severus takes hold of Lupin's hand.

"No, you didn't."

The corners of Lupin's mouth lift wryly as his eyes flick over words on the page.

"Thank you."

Severus runs his thumb over a scar on the back of Lupin's hand. It's easier than it has ever been, he thinks, to take comfort from Lupin. To give it, also. Perhaps the easiest it's ever been with anyone in his life, but he does not want to think that. Not for a moment. If he does, he will feel the precious weight of it, like a delicate blackbird's egg. He will know how fragile it is and fragile things do not survive around Severus Snape. Black's sneering voice echoes back to him: *I've seen what happens to the people you love.*

"You're welcome." Lupin sighs. "I wish I could say it was only adolescent desire that brought me here but I was newly mated. It was agony to be apart."

Severus remembers how abrupt Lupin's absence felt that summer, how he mourned for those long days in the library, sharing words and secret kisses behind bookcases. He'd been lonely in his life, he'd coveted Lily's easy friendships with others and missed her presence in Slytherin, but that summer had been the first time he had been lonely for a person. For Remus' smell, for his taste, for the warmth of his body beside him as they read books, comfortably touching and saying nothing.

"I did not find it enjoyable either," Severus says.

"That's what worries me about Harry and Theodore," Lupin whispers, taking his eyes off his paper and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "If a fidelity bond is anything like a mating bond ... it makes you do insane things, Severus."

"Like take the Knight bus without supervision from Wales to Birmingham when you are twelve years old?"

"Like almost kill your best friend when he threatens the life of your mate," Lupin's eyes fix on Severus. Amber fire in burnished fur, glowing in the dark of the tunnel. "James was the only reason I didn't. He saved Sirius. You weren't the one in true danger that night."

Severus has never considered this encounter through Lupin's eyes, has never considered that when Black directed him down the tunnel he was sending Lupin's first bonded mate to possible death by his own hand. It is brutal, not just for Severus, who knew nothing about the lycanthropy of his first love, but for Lupin, who was keeping it a secret from the first person he had ever bonded to.

"Did he know?" Severus asks abruptly. "About us?"

If he did, then it is cruelty on another level. *Sirius Black, creating chaos and causing pain in all the worst ways.*

“No,” Lupin says shortly. Severus thinks that this is perhaps the only reason Lupin was able to forgive Black, more than forgive him, to go on and love him. He imagines the mental contortions: *he didn't mean it, he didn't know, he's just jealous, he loves me*. The thought makes him savagely glad that Black is dead. If he wasn't, he'd take great pleasure in testing his latest blood-boiling potion on him.

“Well then,” Severus looks away, unable to stop the bitterness on his tongue. “Convenient for him that you later established a bond with him that would protect him from your ire.”

“You're angry about that?” Lupin's voice is full of surprise.

“I am not in the least disturbed by the notion that you took a partner after our adolescent arrangement,” Severus says firmly, leaving the obvious ‘*after all, I took many and made a child,*’ unsaid. “I only object to the subject of your affection.”

Mother-fucking-Sirius Black. Lupin gives him a long, indecipherable look and then turns back to his monograph.

“You weren't the only one,” Lupin mutters. Severus is surprised. He expected Lupin to offer nothing more on the subject. These are the most words they have exchanged on Black since his death. Severus is not sure that he likes it. “Lily told me I was insane.”

Severus hesitates. He does not think it is his place to bring any information about Black and Lupin's relationship to the wolf, but since all of the other parties are dead, he has no choice. It is the first time he has been annoyed at James Potter for dying. *You motherfucker, you should be doing this, not me.*

“Because she knew.” Severus holds Lupin's hand tight. “She was aware that Black's motives, if not his affections, would always be planted firmly elsewhere.”

Lupin is very quiet. For a moment, Severus thinks he hasn't heard him, he is so fixated on the words in his hands. Then Severus sees that his eyes are not moving, pupils steadfastly ignoring the sentences on the page. So Severus waits.

“Lily knew about the parabatai bond?” Lupin asks. For a second, he sounds about nineteen and Severus has a flash of him, the last time Severus saw him before Albus undoubtedly sent him away on a fool's errand in Romania in 1980. In the doorway of Scrivenshafts in London, unable to speak or acknowledge one another, on opposite sides of a war. Lupin drifting past him, eyes down. A mournful, quiet whisper hidden under the sound of the bell on the door: *Goodbye, Severus.*

“Yes.”

“How do you -?”

“In the buried memory, the pandora's box,” Severus says, trying to get it over with. He feels oddly complicit and it is very disturbing. “She told me about their bond. How it ... scared her for the future. No doubt it scared her for you, too.”

Lupin's eyes flash with anger for a moment. It is an anger Severus understands. He has wished Lily back to make demands of her many, many times.

“She should have told me,” Lupin says quietly. Severus shakes his head with mirthless laughter. On the subject of things Lily should have told, Severus could write his own monograph.

“Yes,” he says drily. “She should have.”

Lupin breathes out slowly, closes his eyes for a moment and then opens them with a nod. Severus doesn’t know how he does this, how his anger can flare so brightly and then be so quickly doused. For Severus, anger is an ember, always burning. For Harrison too, he suspects. Lupin, however, who actually transforms into a mythic beast made of rage once a month, is an enigma. He calmly lets go of Severus’ hand to pick up a quill and underline a sentence. Severus reads it over his shoulder: *Neuro-atypical wixen are chronically underdiagnosed because examples of mental overstimulation are overwhelmingly classified as childhood accidental magic rather than genuine emotional responses that could persist into adulthood.* Next to it, Lupin has scrawled: *accidental magic = trauma response?* Severus marvels a little jealously at the quick turnings of his theoretical mind.

“Harry’s never had a birthday party.”

“And?” Severus is still too busy admiring Lupin’s conclusions to really pay attention.

“George mentioned when he flooded last night. He’s never had one.”

“So?”

“So children should have birthday parties,” Lupin says. Severus doesn’t disagree, but he also does not feel like he can possibly be an authority on the subject.

“Have you ever had one?” Severus asks.

“Of course I’ve had -,” Lupin looks up sharply and catches Severus’ eye. “Not you too.”

“I do not know why that should be surprising,” Severus looks down at his book and tries to concentrate on his mother’s translation of an ancient Sumerian text on Mage Lore, but can feel Lupin’s eyes upon him. He remembers Lily bringing a cupcake to the park with a candle in it, the first birthday cake of his life, aged ten. *Happy birthday, Sev, make a wish.* He had closed his eyes and wished they would always be together and for this reason alone, Severus knows that wish-magic is complete bollocks.

“Did you kill your father?” Lupin asks abruptly. It is so unexpected that Severus does not even think of lying.

“That depends,” Severus says.

“On what?” Lupin underlines another sentence. *When we consider the traditional model of understanding, that accidental magic is merely the magical discharge of a wixen’s intentionality, the expression of their wants and desires, we can see how limiting this might be for neuroatypical wixen whose magical discharge represents not their desires but their need to regulate both their magic and emotions.*

“On whether accidental magic in teenagers is a trauma response or a sign of magical intentionality,” Severus says softly. Lupin’s quill hesitates on the page. Before he can speak, Severus flinches. Together, they look down at his forearm. The dark mark writhes, the snake twisting in a warning.

Lupin stiffens. They knew this may happen. Narcissa and Draco told Lucius about the Sanctuary clause yesterday. No doubt Lucius has told the Dark Lord. *It's time*. Severus reaches for his shirt and trousers, dressing quickly. Lupin says nothing. By the time Severus is reaching for his robe, Lupin finds his voice.

“Severus -,” he says.

“I have to go,” Severus cuts him off. He is in the mental process of burying and killing the things he cares for. Tonight, his godson will either be free or condemned to be a Death Eater. He cannot talk about Tobias now.

“I know.” Lupin looks at him for a long moment, amber eyes bright. He doesn't move, quill hovering over the paper. “Harry called you his father.”

“What?” Severus stops buttoning up his robe.

“To Petunia. He said ‘*tell me my father's name.*’ ”

Severus' chest hurts. He remembers the fury in the child's voice, the tautness of his face in the memory. *My father*. It is not how Severus imagined it to happen because he never imagined that Harrison would ever willingly form the phrase, but there is something oddly satisfying to him that the first time he hears those words on Harrison's lips, the child is launching them at Petunia in hatred. *Apt*.

“What of it?” Severus discreetly pulls his white mask out from a desk drawer. It doesn't matter. Lupin sees. His eyes follow its movement as Severus tucks it in his robes like it is a venomous arachnid. When Lupin speaks his voice is low and measured but emphatic. If it could be full of magic, Severus thinks it would be. Instead, it is the hint of a growl that sets the hair on Severus' forearms on end.

“Draco is your godson and you love him, but whatever happens tonight, you are Harry's *father*.” Lupin turns back to his monograph. “Don't forget it.”

— — —

“Perhaps you can explain this, Severus,” the Dark Lord hisses. He is twirling his wand, eyes gleaming red with the lustre of torture. Severus looks at Narcissa, who is standing to the side, impossibly stiff. Lucius is on the floor of the great hall in Urquart Castle, kneeling and bloody.

“Why would he know?” Bellatrix sneers. She is standing in the shadows behind the Dark Lord. “This is a family meeting.”

It is a small group indeed, Bellatrix and Lucius and Narcissa and the Dark Lord. Severus knows this does not bode well. The Dark Lord is almost his most violent when he has the privacy to truly relish it.

“We wanted you to hear it from our lips, my Lord,” Narcissa says deferentially.

“I want to hear it from him,” the Dark Lord turns his gaze on Severus. “What have you kept from me, Severus?”

The phrasing of the question is not a good sign. Severus bows low.

“My Lord, I did not hold back out of deference to others, but only to confirm the information with Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix.”

“What did you learn?”

“The Potter boy has instigated a clause as Lord Black Apparent -,”

“Impossible! How can he be the Lord?” Bellatrix screeches.

“Because he was the heir to the last one whom you killed,” Severus’ voice is sharp and he regrets it, but luckily, the Dark Lord’s torture of Lucius seems to have left him cheery.

“Yes, Bella, and since you were so quick to depose Sirius Black, you ushered in my young Harry to the youngest Lordship in centuries,” the Dark Lord laughs meanly. “How foolish you are.”

My young Harry. The words stick like barbs in Severus’ mind. He tries to ignore them.

“I was trying to serve you, my Lord -,” Bellatrix croons.

“You serve yourself! *Crucio!*”

Severus watches her squirm on the floor next to Lucius and catches Narcissa’s eye. She is stoic, blanched as white as sheet, but unmoving. They are on a knife-edge, all of them, and Draco hangs in the balance.

“Continue, Severus!” The Dark Lord’s voice is soft. He is always more relaxed when someone else is moaning in pain. Severus moves on with his and Narcissa’s lie.

“I can only give what has been gleaned in the Order meetings, since the new Steward, Magnus Bane, does not attend, but Potter wanted to control the loyalty of those in his house, especially those underage -,”

“It is as we said, my Lord,” Lucius gasps. “Draco knew nothing, chose nothing, this is a violation of his rights -,”

“It is intended to be, as well as a show of what seems to be ... above-average power,” Severus says, hoping to divert the Dark Lord from questioning the ins and outs of Harrison’s binding of Draco. If the Dark Lord considers Harrison to be a normal wixen child then he cannot have initiated the Sanctuary clause and its existence must, naturally, implicate Narcissa. “Heir Malfoy is the only underage Wixen currently in the direct line of the House of Black. This new binding is intended to render him impotent. He cannot make an assault upon the new Lord Black Apparent.”

And is therefore useless to your task. Severus hopes it shall be enough.

“Hmm,” the Dark Lord casts a casual flaying spell at the back of Lucius’ hand. Lucius groans stiffly as the skin pulls away slowly but doesn’t move. “Yes, my little weapon is certainly ... how did you characterise it, Severus? *Above average.* Strange you never caught that in all these years of teaching.”

My little weapon. Severus will not flinch, he will not even think about the Dark Lord's affection for his son. He will bury it under a mountain of snow inside his mind and feel absolutely nothing.

"Heirships change a child," Severus says flippantly. "His inheritance might make him powerful but the essentials of the boy remain mediocre."

"Goodness, Severus," the Dark Lord smirks. "Your ire against Potter and Black still knows no bounds."

You have no fucking idea, Severus thinks darkly.

"Draco can choose!" Bellatrix gasps, scrambling to grab the Dark Lord's robes. Severus wants to kick her in the face. "He can deny the loyalty he owes. He can have himself thrown from the house of Black and still be useful to you, my Lord."

"You wish to cast my son away from his opportunity for an inheritance?" Lucius hisses at Bellatrix. Though he is trembling with the pain, his eyes flash with fury. "Is this nothing more than a ploy to ensure you are at the last Black standing?"

For the Dark Lord, that might be a compelling offer. Bellatrix is nothing more than a puppet and the Dark Lord might enjoy control over the House of Black. Severus needs to think fast.

"It would do her no good," Severus says softly. "He named an Heir."

When I get home I must get Harrison to name an Heir. Severus spears that thought through the heart and buries it under snow. The icy landscape of his mindscape cools and calms him. This will work because it has to and because he will make it work. *Lies are not lies when you kill the truth.*

"What?" Bellatrix hisses.

"Excuse me?" Lucius whispers.

The Dark Lord chuckles darkly.

"Of course he did, my clever boy, why would he not?" Severus feels sick to hear the Dark Lord's tone. Something furious and roaring, howling and screeching rises up inside him and with one voice, screams inside his mind: *He is not your boy.* "Who did he name?"

"That I do not know," Severus bows his head. "Forgive me, my Lord."

He expects the curse but it doesn't mean it hurts any less. He bites his tongue, his mouth fills with blood, but he does not scream. When he stops thrashing on the floor, he hears laughter above.

"My dear brewer," the Dark Lord's voice is silky above him and a cold hand grips his elbow, dragging him back up on shaking legs. "Always so quiet."

Severus stands, trying not to stagger. He is the only one permitted to rise. He sees Lucius looking at him with envious and hungry eyes. Bellatrix's face is a picture of vengeful fury from her spot kneeling by the Dark Lord's feet.

"If I may, my Lord," Narcissa's voice is cool from the sidelines, her eyes sharp.

“You may, Lady *Black*, ” the Dark Lord sneers. Lucius twitches at the insult. Narcissa merely inclines her head in response. If the Dark Lord knew how deeply Narcissa was a Lady of the House of Black, a Stryer of the Black Magic and fealty bonded to its Lord, he would likely not make jokes.

“There is a way forward to remove my son from the new Lord Black apparent’s sphere of influence. With your permission, I shall remove him to the continent, let him work with your agents abroad, away from the new ties to the Black Lord. Then he cannot be forced to actively work against you.”

Severus holds his breath. This is the moment, he realises, when Draco might be rescued.

“There is no need of that, Lady Black,” the Dark Lord says, twirling his wand through long fingers. Severus sees Lucius stiffen. He is the most likely target of any flying curses at the moment.

“But my Lord,” Bellatrix splutters, “if Draco cannot raise his wand against the boy, what *use* can he possibly be if he cannot even touch him -?”

“As you did, Bella, when you tore my little weapon apart?” The Dark Lord has a white hand around Bellatrix’s throat in a moment, bloody teeth bared. He pushes her against the wall, her feet dangling, struggling, to breathe. Severus hears a horrible crack in Bellatrix’s gurgles. He tries not to wince. “You are lucky he is strong, that he could survive, or I would have ripped more than screams from you. Why would I want *anyone* to touch him?”

Bellatrix is thrown across the room, gasping for breath. They all watch as she fumbles for her wand and then wheezes a spell to save herself. Severus is mildly disappointed. He would quite happily watch her suffocate right there on the floor.

“Forgive me,” Bellatrix wheezes.

“Never,” the Dark Lord spits. “You sought to claim what was not yours. The boy is *mine*, and mine alone. You do not touch him, *ever*.”

Narcissa and Severus stare at one another, their last conversation about Harrison’s connection with the Dark Lord tumbling in their shared memory: *they are more connected than perhaps even Albus Dumbledore knows. The depth of it is disconcerting.* Now, it is more than disconcerting. Now, Severus feels deep fear trying to resurrect itself underneath the acres snow of his mindscape. Severus will not let it breathe, not here, not now. Yet the facts are hard to bear. The Dark Lord has, in the past, exhibited similar levels of obsession with Harrison but this time it feels different. After all, he has never much cared if the child suffered. He’s enjoyed his suffering, especially when he can cause it within Harrison’s mind. Yet Bellatrix has now had her larynx crushed for daring to suggest that Harrison would be touched by a Death Eater, crushed in a muggle way, physically abusive in a manner which the Dark Lord usually laughs at, usually despises. His response to Bellatrix seemed ... instinctive. Severus remembers Harrison’s desperate, plaintive voice: *he wants me, he wants to keep me.* Severus remembers the Dark Lord’s gleeful words to Severus the last time they met privately: *Soon, my little weapon will join us. Soon, he will be ours.* Severus cannot help the nauseating worry that actually, the Dark Lord believes Harrison is already his.

“I only serve you, my Lord,” Bellatrix croons hoarsely, pressing her face against the Dark Lord’s boots. He does not seem sated by this, only irritated.

“Bring Draco in,” the Dark Lord snaps. Narcissa nods and walks to the door. Lucius’ back stiffens but he is still not permitted to stand. Severus tries to hide his tension. This is not a good mood for Draco to approach the Dark Lord in. His wand is quick and his punishments brutal. Severus does not want to watch his godson be tortured. Draco is well dressed in all black, robes lined with green ribbon that shimmers in the flickering low light of the candles. Nagini slithers along beside him as he walks and Draco does a good job of only letting his eyes dart fearfully down to the giant snake a few times.

“My Lord,” Draco bows. Severus sees his knees trembling. He has a flash, a horrible, unhelpful flash of Regulus, dark hair hiding his handsome face and eyes refusing to look at Severus, standing in the Dark Lord’s presence for the first time. *Not again.*

“Draco,” the Dark Lord’s voice is syrupy. It makes Severus nauseous. “Your parents are under the impression that your new position in the House of Black will disrupt your work. Will it?”

“No, my Lord,” Draco whispers, his adam’s apple bobs in his pale throat as he speaks. His skin looks so vulnerable, the column of his neck muscles visible. “I am your servant in all things.”

Severus sees the tension in Narcissa’s jaw, in Lucius’ back. They have taught their son these words. They have coached him on what to say. Oddly, Severus thinks of how his son speaks to the Dark Lord, the flecks of memory he has seen in Harrison’s eyes in between nightmares: *you’re just as insane as you were five years ago, what do you want, Tom?* He is very proud, suddenly, of his child’s irreverent bravery in the face of insanity.

“My Lord, let me take on the task of Draco’s,” Lucius says, as silkily as he can manage, eyes fixed on the stone flags under his knees. “He is incapacitated, he is not useful. He will bring shame to my house. Let me serve you instead.”

“I’m not incapacitated!” Draco says hotly, typically. Severus sees Narcissa’s shoulders slump slightly behind him. Draco has not learned enough from his parents. He has been too sheltered. He does not see lies made to protect him when they flow from his father’s mouth. “I don’t need to get close to Potter to serve the Dark Lord in my task!”

Severus’ heart lifts: *it is not Harrison’s murder he plots*, then plummets. *If it is not Harrison’s murder then whose is it, and how do we save Draco from the mark?*

“Well said, Draco,” the Dark Lord steps forward and cups Draco’s face with a white hand. Severus is proud that Draco does not flinch, for that would certainly be deadly, but he remembers the Dark Lord touching Regulus just so. His stomach plummets. “We do not let mere fathers define our destinies, do we?”

In a flash, Severus is sixteen. *“If your muggle father was dead, he could no longer hurt you, little brewer.”*

“No, my Lord,” Draco’s face is set, fierce. Severus’ heart sinks at the predictability of it. This is the secret of the Dark Lord’s appeal, after all, promising sons they can be greater than their fathers.

“What a courageous little snake,” the Dark Lord grins, forked tongue licking his lips. “Lucius, you wish to take what is his? Well then, for every failure of Draco’s, you shall feel the burn of my wand, twice as hot as if it were meant for him.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Lucius murmurs. Severus sees the way Draco’s eyes flash with fear, worry, and then irritation.

“Thank you, my Lord,” Draco echoes flatly.

Severus would admire the subtle manipulations of the Dark Lord if he did not feel like he was caught in a loop of time, of the same cursed repetition of the Dark Lord’s machinations. The Dark Lord knows Draco will resent his father’s love and protection, and in all his misguided youth, will wish to be counted as an equal amongst the Death Eaters. To watch his father suffer his punishments will only breed resentment in the child and desperation in the father. For Lucius will push him not to fail and Draco shall no longer think it is because Lucius loves him. He shall think it is because Lucius fears pain. *This is what the Dark Lord does best, Severus thinks wearily. Sees weakness and exploits it.*

“Then he shall be marked,” the Dark Lord glares at Lucius, as if daring him to suggest otherwise. “The New Moon.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Lucius says. “For this tremendous honour.”

“Three generations,” the Dark Lord runs long fingers through Lucius’ dirtied hair. “Will your son follow in your footsteps?”

Severus watches Narcissa and feels, once again, a surge of affection for her. She is a marvel. She is a genius. For surely, only a person with the strength of Atlas himself would be able to stand, elegant and impassive, as the monster who beds her husband suggests that her underage child will serve him in the same way. Severus sees a flicker of black inside her blue irises, the sparkle of the Black magic. Severus knows she will die before Draco steps foot in the Dark Lord’s bedchamber and Severus loves her for it. On the floor, Lucius swallows hard.

“I can only hope so, my Lord,” he whispers. Standing beside him, refusing to look at his subjugated father, Severus sees the way Draco’s hands curl into fists. Yet his chin is lifted, he will not falter or show his fear. The Dark Lord laughs, a high pitch horrible sound that bounces off the walls. He reaches down and pulls Lucius to his feet by the lapels of his robes. For a horrible moment, Severus thinks they are all going to be exposed to the sight of the Dark Lord kissing Lucius Malfoy in front of his own wife and child, but luckily, the Dark Lord only tugs Lucius’ lapels roughly, urging him to follow him. Lucius stumbles but obeys. Severus sees Draco’s look of disgust.

“Come, Lucius, come, Bella,” the Dark Lord says, sweeping from the room with Nagini trailing in their wake, her scales hissing against the stone. “Whilst Draco need not worry about my little weapon, you must, since you both lost him after he left his relatives.”

Severus longs to follow, to eavesdrop, to know the plans the Dark Lord has for his child, but Draco is standing stiffly in the centre of the room, swallowing hard. They all wait, in silence, for the sound of footsteps to recede. Draco stares at the closed door. He looks as if he is hoping his father will come back, will walk through the door with his usual stride and nobility of bearing. Severus knows he will not. In the Dark Lord’s presence, they are all shadows of their worst, most humbled selves. Draco feels it already, Severus can see it in the unspent rage loitering in his clenched fists. He already despises his own meek responses and fearful words, as they all do. It is part of the horror of serving a madman of untold power, that the helplessness felt in his presence makes them all monstrous out in the world. For when you have survived an hour with Dark Lord, what have you to fear but him? Severus can already see how Draco’s next year at school will go. *He will be reckless and lazy and quick to curse. I will have to watch him closely.*

“Severus.” Narcissa gives Severus a look and then waves her wand. The doors slam closed and Draco jumps, looking at his mother. Narcissa stands in front of him and pats a crease out of the shoulder of his robe.

“Now is the time, Draco,” she says, her voice a whisper. “You will tell us your task or Severus shall take it from your mind.”

It is such a casual promise but Severus is not surprised. Narcissa has clearly felt the Dark Lord’s veiled threats keenly. She will do what she must to ensure Draco lives. Severus does not think forced legilimency is a great moral stretch for a woman who has already bound her child to Harrison without his consent.

“He can’t,” Draco’s voice is defiant. “Auntie Bella has been teaching me Occlumency.”

Severus tries not to smirk. Bellatrix has many, horrible talents but superior Occlumency shields are not one of them. She thinks she is talented but really, her mind is simply so disorganised that most legilimens would simply give up. Not Severus. He sometimes longs to pin the woman to the inside of her mind and rake through the chaos with all the precision and order of an accountant. What secrets he would find.

“It will not be enough,” Narcissa says softly. “I do not ask for details or plans, I only ask for a name.”

“You won’t have it,” Draco snorts, shrugging off his mother’s touch. “Honestly, mother, I’m not an idiot, all you need to know is it’s *not* Potter so then you don’t have to worry about Bane -,”

“Are you truly comfortable targeting one of your classmates, Draco?” Severus says softly. “Another child?”

“I’m not a child,” Draco sneers and rests his eyes on Severus. There’s disdain there, but also perhaps a sliver of respect. Severus doesn’t need to ask why. *My dear brewer, always so quiet.* Lucius cannot bear the pain as Severus can, no Death Eater can. Of course, Draco wants that kind of status. “Besides, there are more than *children* living at Hogwarts.”

Draco turns tail and leaves, not noticing that Narcissa lifts her spell to let him out. This is why, Severus thinks, Draco will never be a spy. He does not ask the important questions. He does not stop to wonder why his mother is letting him go when she demanded information. He does not consider that perhaps he has given her exactly what she needed without realising. Narcissa gestures her wand, writing runes in the air. They settle around them, made of white light. Severus sees a sequence that denotes silence. He casts a subtle *muffliato* , just in case.

“Not a student,” Severus mutters. There is only one person on the staff of Hogwarts who the Dark Lord would actively benefit from the death of. *Aside from myself.*

“Dumbledore,” Narcissa whispers.

They stand in silence for a moment. It is a failure waiting to happen, if they didn’t know it before then they know it now. Lucius’ failure in April is undoubtedly being punished and once Draco fails entirely and each small bump along the way has been tortured out of Lucius, the Dark Lord will kill him and make Draco watch, or worse, have Draco kill Lucius. Then the Dark Lord will mould Draco, a being made out of despair, guilt and resentment toward the father who could not save him

and whom he could not save. Severus would admire the ingenuity of it if it did not make him think vividly of how the Dark Lord had handled Severus and Tobias.

“Will you do it?” Narcissa asks softly. “If Draco can’t?”

Severus thinks of Albus, purportedly the greatest Wixen who has ever lived. Severus knows he could take his life away from him if he had to, but there is only one person who he would do that for. *Harrison*. Conveniently, when it comes to Harrison, the catalogue of wrongs that Albus has built up against his child is catastrophic. Severus thinks of Petunia glaring at Harrison: *why the hell would he want you? Nobody did*. Albus was the reason Harrison was in that house, with that woman, all that time. Severus might have left Harrison in Godric’s Hollow and Petunia might have kept him at Privet Drive but Albus was the damning link in between. Severus thinks of Harrison’s tearful voice earlier that day: *it wasn’t all your fault then, was it?*

The child is right, Severus thinks. He will bear the blame and the shame for his part in Harrison’s childhood for however long his life may be, but he cannot and should not bear it all. There is someone else who is still to be held accountable.

“Yes,” Severus says. “I shall.”

Narcissa nods.

“Will you tell the wolf?” she asks.

“Not yet.”

Severus cannot imagine explaining this to Lupin at the moment. He may have lost all of his love for Albus but Severus does not imagine that Lupin could quite get his head around Severus happily killing the old man on Draco’s behalf. Severus is not sure he can fully get his own head around it. *I shall be forever known as the man who killed a legend*.

“Harry?”

“No.”

Harrison will have no pity for Draco. Severus would not ask him to. As for Albus, Harrison does not deserve to have the man’s fate weighing on his conscience.

“The voice magic ...” Severus knows what she’s referring to. He recalls the dark ripples of magic pulsing from his son as Harrison compelled Draco without mercy.

“Bane has it under control,” Severus says, even though he is not sure that is entirely true. *Can anyone control a Mage?* There is no adequate apology for Harrison’s actions, but Severus feels as if he must attempt one. “He is regretful.”

“So was Bella,” Narcissa gives him a sharp, sad look. “The first time.”

Severus does not want to think about how his son could be corrupted by the Black magic, just like Bellatrix was. Severus decides to believe the corruption was in the woman herself, rather than the magic.

“Lucius?” Severus asks.

“I do not think so,” Narcissa shakes her head. “He would only seek to help.”

Severus nods. Narcissa must have also predicted how Draco will respond to Lucius’ assistance. It is better that Lucius is kept as far away from Draco’s task as possible. It will be down to Narcissa and Severus to guide him towards success and, in the event of abject failure, step in to avoid disaster. Although disaster seems to be careening towards them from every direction.

“He will be marked,” Narcissa stretches out her hand. It is steady, but the black ring glows. Severus imagines it feels heavy, the portent of the moment full of possibility for her Scrying eyes.

“Yes,” Severus takes her hand and laces her long fingers into his. Perhaps he can bear some of the weight. “He shall.”

The new moon is in two weeks' time. In two weeks, his godson will be a Death Eater.

“I was a fool,” Narcissa whispers. “I saw the mark in the glass. Nothing seen in the glass can ever be avoided.”

Severus’ stomach lurches. He remembers what Narcissa said she saw in the glass when she Scryed for Draco’s task: *Every time I saw only the same thing. A tower and your son.*

“I hope you are wrong,” Severus says quietly.

“We will watch it and do nothing to stop it,” she whispers.

As Abraxas watched Lucius. As Lucius watched me. As I watched Regulus.

Severus swallows hard. He has not realised, until this point, how much he had hoped that their plan might work and they might free Draco from this fate. Now it is closing around them and there is nowhere to run that does involve someone’s death. Oddly, Severus thinks of Harrison on the beach in Skye. *I met Death. We’re friends now.* Severus thinks that perhaps Death has always been a friend of the Princes. For surely, she waits in every corner and dogs the footsteps of those they love with every turn.

“We must,” he says. “So he lives.”

Narcissa nods silently. She does not move. Severus can feel Narcissa’s steady heartbeat against his own wrist. He feels, suddenly, that they are of one blood and one purpose. Very gently, she squeezes his hand. Softly, he squeezes back. Soon, they must both go back to their sons and try to keep them alive, but for now, they do not move. They stand together in silence and stare at Lucius’ blood on the floor.

ART BY A_LoveUnlaced

Chapter Notes

NOT A CHAPTER!

Chapter update will be tomorrow as usual.

This is @A.LoveUnlaced creating a beautiful portrait of Harry and Theo's kiss in Privet Drive in chapter 24. Enjoy!

Elphie and I worked together when designing Harry's scars and how the Black Diamond embeds into his skin. I hope you love this moment as much as I do!



Return to the Ministry

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (references to depression/suicidal feelings)

This time, Theo makes birthday plans for Harry.
Next time, a chat with the Minister of Magic.

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

Dear Theodore,

I understand you have returned to the company of your Lord, though the Contessa does not know where. I congratulate you upon your ingenuity and you know if you ever need me, I am at your service. Tell Harry he owes me a Totti shirt and since I no longer have the pleasure of watching Lord Weasley practice axe-wielding topless, he owes me pictures of that also. How is Harry?

Never forget who you have always been, my friend. Heart be the bolder. Keep your blades sharp.

Your consort shield and brother in arms,

Blaise Zabini

Heir to the House of Zabini

Dear Theodore,

The serpent has vanished and Tori fears that she has lost it. Can you let me know if it has arrived with you? Tori would like you to tell Harry that she is happy to “reptile-sit” any time he likes. I fear I may have to buy her a lizard familiar.

I have told my father that you are currently staying with friends in Ireland and that you will be spending most of August at your mother’s house as you do every summer. I think that will give you enough cover to continue hiding away wherever Harry is. I believe my father will possibly require your presence at the end of the summer to ensure you are properly equipped for our return to school but until then, enjoy your Lord’s company.

I remember that you mentioned your mother’s talent for healing. I’ve included a book from the Greengrass library on some of the ancient healing practises of Singapore and her surrounding islands for your reference. Something to keep your mind sharp, at least. Enjoy.

With care and trust,

Daphne Greengrass

Heir to the House of Greengrass.

Lord Nott Apparent,

Draco mentioned your current essay research into historical consorts. Please see the attached reading material. Whilst there are more modern books on the role of a consort available, perhaps the kind your peers may know of, I believe the kind of essay your Professors will expect of a NEWT level student will include a diversity of consort roles. The kind found in the pages of this book.

Lady Malfoy of the House of Malfoy

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Blaise,

Harry says the Totti shirt is forthcoming and he won't take pictures of Weasley because it is, and I quote "creepy as fuck." I have recently been reminded of the benefit of a bold heart and for that, both Harry and I are better. Thank you. I've included a healing balm that I made that should speed up some of the muscle regrowth in your ankle. I cannot have my consort shield unable to run. My blades are always sharp.

Your brother in arms,

Theodore Nott.

Lord Apparent to the House of Nott

Daphne,

Thank you for the book. You know, of course, that I do not read Malay Rumi script, but I am sure that is the mind-sharpening activity that you intended. We have no need of a reptile babysitter, but we shall of course keep your sister in mind. With regards to pets, Harry is forcing me to write that 'a Komodo dragon would be fucking cool for a Slytherin.' Since we both know they can grow up to three meters in length and are apex predators, I think we can dismiss this suggestion. A bearded dragon might suit Astoria better. When it comes to purchasing reptiles, I suggest the apothecary in Diagon Alley. That is where Apollonius purchased Sahara and she was the best gift of my life. Thank you for smoothing the way with your father.

Alleanza, as always, daughter of the House of Greengrass,

With care and trust,

Theodore Nott.

Lord Apparent to the House of Nott.

— — —

I shall call you as you are called by those who guard me, therefore, thank you for the book, Lady Macbeth.

I am unsure of the relevance of these stories and myths to my original question. I also continue my perusal of the other book you gave me. The text reads: "he that doth shield his mynd must bende his will toward a shield as the shield of fayth. He that prayes upon it shall be defended most assuredly." Another occlumency master has informed me that using mind-shielding is an outdated practise. If that is the case, I wonder why you gave me the book. I have chosen to communicate with you in a way I know to be guarded under the guidance of our mutual friend (he explained the privacy of this floo) but since we are keeping our faces hidden, I shall adopt a name that I have read herein.

You may call me Gwion.

Gwion,

I appreciate your discretion in all things. You look for stories of consorts. You desire to learn how to become one. The ancient stories of Elphin and Taliesin, Merlin and Morgana and John of Nottingham and Robert Marshall will be more akin to what you seek.

Your occlumency consultant is correct, of course, mind-shielding is thought of as outdated in the mental arts. But it is a branch of magic that prides itself on the rational, and the prayerful reflection and connection to the spiritual required for mind-shielding might have simply fallen out of style for the post-Renaissance Occlumens. I believe you have the acquaintance of the greatest living occlumens. Yet each occlumens journey is different. His, and those he has taught, flourish in the mindscape method. You, however, are a Son of War. Your ancestors threw rune stones for Agroboda. You follow the roots of Yggdrasil. Thus, I believe you are more than capable of the faith that is necessary for the ancient mind-shielders.

Lady Macbeth

My Lady,

These are not tales of consorts, not as I understand them. I have been led to believe that the role of consort is both political and also espousal. Can we consider those pairs you spoke of to have been bonded in such a way? I have not spoken of Yggdrasil since the death of my mother. She cast rune

stones and burnt sacrifices. She prayed or meditated, as we could call it. Do you believe these practices might help me strengthen my mind-shield?

Gwion.

Young Gwion,

I believe connecting to the spiritual practice of she who bore and loved you most can only be valuable. If it is not productive for your mind-shield, it shall be productive for your growth. I answer your question with one of my own: Are not all espousal bonds political? There is no historical notion that Merlin and Morgana ever took vows or allied politically. Yet they were bonded. For what bonds two people more effectively than magic? You do not only look to be a consort, Gwion. You look for destiny. Seek out stories of partnership, equal partnership, between those of great powers and you may find it.

Lady Macbeth

My Lady,

You seek to push me towards an equal partnership, but there is no magical equity between myself and the one who has my heart. I am not deluded as to my own strengths. The text says: "as the Lord cast forth fire to shield the saints so shall a mind-shield be of fire." I cannot imagine that the author ever thought a Norseman would use his seemingly Judeo-Christian text. Yet I see similarities: are you aware that when we honour our dead, it is with flame? Our stories are also written on shields. Are you familiar with the Haustlöng?

Gwion.

Young Gwion,

I will admit that I am not as familiar with Norse mythology and beliefs as I could be. But I am sure that as Sutr's sword flames with "the sun of Gods of the slain," your mind must have its own fiery defender. What others use imagination for you can use faith and tradition and culture. It belongs to you, Gwion. Please find attached this modern history book. Perhaps you might consider examining the powerful partnerships of our own times. Gellert Grindlewald had a partner. When you learn his name you will ask yourself, who was the more powerful between them? One was called a Dark Lord so the other must be a consort or rival, as our language dictates, but is it fitting to call that man a consort? Was one more powerful than the other or were they simply different in their power?

All I seek is for you to better understand who you are destined to be.

Lady Macbeth.

My Lady,

You see the ways unclear. Yours is a way of water and moonlight. As she cast in stones, you cast in glass. Do you know what I will be?

Gwion.

Young Gwion,

I do not know. It would also not be prudent for me to ever tell you if I did. What I do know is that not all great powers we call Kings. Not all great wixen we call Lords. Not all great Consorts are called Consorts. The one who holds your heart is no King nor Lord. He is more. Perhaps there is another name for what you are destined to be.

Lady Macbeth.

My Lady,

Perhaps there is. When I slept, I saw flame. I am glad. Thank you for the books.

Gwion.

— — — —

Theodore Asger Nott - Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations

Passing grades: Acceptable 50 - 70 Exceeds Expectations 71 - 89 Outstanding 90 - 100.

Failing grades: Terminated 0-10 Dreadful 11-25 Poor - 26 - 50

Theoretical Examinations:

Ancient Runes Written Exam (98)

Arithmancy Written Exam (97)

Charms Written Exam (99)

History of Magic Written Exam (90)

Potions Written Exam (100)

Transfiguration Written Exam (95)

Practical Examinations:

Ancient Runes Practical Exam (93)

Astrology Practical Exam (89)

Charms Practical Exam (98)

Care of Magical Creatures Practical Exam (90)

Defence Against the Dark Arts Practical Exam (91)

Herbology Practical Exam (92)

Potions Practical Exam (99)

Transfiguration Practical Exam (90)

Total grades:

Ancient Runes - Outstanding

Arithmancy - Outstanding

Astrology - Exceeds Expectations

Charms - Outstanding

Care of Magical Creatures - Outstanding.

Defence against the Dark Arts - Outstanding

Herbology - Outstanding

History of Magic - Outstanding

Potions - Outstanding

Transfiguration - Outstanding

Mr Nott is also to be congratulated on achieving the highest Potions Grade of the OWL Hogwarts Students for 1996.

“Wow,” Harry sees, reading the scores over Theo’s shoulder. “Jesus Christ, Theo, the highest grade of the year?”

“At Hogwarts,” Theo says, staring at the scores.

“Yeah, but unless someone at Durmstrang got 100% on both the practical and the theoretical -,”

“Which is possible,” Theo says.

“But unlikely,” Magnus says. He’s sitting at the counter whilst Kreacher bakes biscuits and is happily dipping a chocolate one in what looks like a normal cup of coffee, but Theo suspects is laced with some kind of creme liquor. Harry is grinning and hugging him from the side, pressing his slightly cold nose against Theo’s cheek.

“Hermione’s going to be really annoying,” Harry chuckles. “You’re so fucking smart.”

Usually, when people say such things, it is in irritation, but the way Harry says it makes Theo feel like there is a small sun inside his chest.

“I am sure Granger’s scores will be comparable,” Theo says, trying not to smile.

“Well, I can tell you now you’re going to find out, expect an owl in about an hour. I’m glad mine hasn’t come yet.” Harry says.

“Yours might come tomorrow,” Theo suggests. Harry took his OWLs later but his results will likely process faster.

“I’m not bothered, it gives us time to make a fuss of you,” Harry gives him a cheesy grin when Theo flushes, kisses Theo quickly on the cheek and then flops down on the sofa, craning his head to look at Kreacher. “Can we have something to celebrate tonight, Kreacher? Since Theo’s done so well?”

“Kreacher will kill a bird,” Kreacher mutters, sprinkling icing sugar over the biscuit dough.

“No, come on, let’s have something else, stop killing all the fucking birds,” Harry moans. “What about some steak?”

“Then Kreacher will kill a cow,” Kreacher snaps.

“You can’t just kill a cow, Kreacher!”

“A pie is fine. I like vegetable pie,” Theo says, looking down at his scores again. Oddly, he imagines how it would be to send these scores to Apollonius. A curt note sent by owl; *acceptable*. Nothing more. Here, however, there is Harry, kissing him and smiling at him and making a fuss. Theo knows it is better and yet still, absurdly, it hurts to know he shall never receive the begrudging acceptance of Apollonius’ response. Still, there is someone he can tell. He imagines what he shall write to Narcissa: *Nine Outstandings*. He can already see her clear, curt responses in elegant cursive: *You are to be congratulated, Gwion*.

“Kreacher cannot kill vegetables,” Kreacher mutters, glaring at Theo.

“I could draw eyes on them,” Harry suggests with a grin. “Do voices, too. “Aurgh! Kreacher! Mighty elf of the house of Black! Don’t disembowel me!”

“Master is a fool,” Kreacher snarls before muttering down to the biscuits. “But it will be adequate.”

“What is your other letter, Theo?” Magnus asks, sipping his coffee. Theo takes it from Hedwig’s beak and she flutters away over to the shelf above the cooker, where she lands and chirrup down to

Kreacher, who snarls at her but throws up half a biscuit. Theo opens it. Reads it. Looks down at Harry.

“What’s wrong?” Harry kneels on the sofa, leaning over the back to read the letter in Theo’s hand.

For the attention of Lord Nott Apparent,

The Minister of Magic cordially invites you to a gathering of the Wizengamot Heirs on the 31 st of July from noon until one in the Ministry of Magic, courtroom ten. We hope you shall be able to attend and join your fellow heirs in a pertinent discussion of our shared future.

May magic bless your endeavours,

Lord Malfoy, The Minister of Magic.

“What the fuck?” Harry moans, flopping down on the sofa. “On my birthday? He’s pulling this bullshit on my birthday?”

“I don’t think it’s specifically to irritate you,” Theo smiles at Harry fondly.

“You received one also, Harry, as Lord Apparent,” Magnus says. “Lucius calls on the future of the Wizengamot.”

Harry scowls and folds his arms across his chest, sulkily.

“And here I thought it was a good day,” Harry grumbles.

It has been a good day. The days have all been good since Harry and Theo arrived at Spinners End. Today, Lupin is in Venice and Snape has to go to Hogwarts for a meeting with the teachers. Magnus has been teaching Harry out in the garden most of the morning, a combination of magical sensing, mage lore and practical control of his voice magic. For that reason, Theo hasn’t been able to watch like he usually does as Harry is too worried about accidentally compelling Theo. He’s been reading Snape’s extensive potions library at the living room table and going down to the basement to check on the bafflement brew that Snape has asked him to watch. Theo knows that Snape is preparing for Theo to approach him for an apprenticeship in seventh year. Theo knows he should be flattered. Snape took Chambers as an apprentice last year but he was an exception that proved a rule of discernment and reticence that makes Snape one of the most elusive Potions Masters in Europe. He rarely ever supervises Masteries and yet Theo knows Snape is preparing Theo should he ever ask. Theo doesn’t doubt that Snape will suggest he teaches some first-year classes this year, he knows it is a tremendous opportunity, but something about it makes him uncertain. It feels impossible to think of himself in two years' time, starting an apprenticeship at Hogwarts, not with the Dark Lord’s shadow looming over them. When he gets too overwhelmed, Theo reads his occlumency book. He is not quite at the point of asking Snape to test his mind-shield, but he sees it inside his mind. Sometimes it is only a flame he could hold in his palm. Other times, it is as wild as forest fire. Very occasionally, he dreams of his shield as he knows it could become. It is round, like the shields of old, and burns with images and runes, the stories of his people.

“I’m not going,” Harry folds his arms and glowers at Theo and Magnus. “Why should I go? It’s my birthday and if Malfoy and I have a shared future it’s one where I’m dead!”

“Or he is,” Theo says reasonably.

“I wish,” Harry mumbles.

“Thought experiment,” Magnus says, sipping his spiked coffee with mischievous eyes. Magnus often does this, and the proposed questions could be anything from something as philosophical as *how do we measure magical potency when our perception of magic is subjective?* To something as absurd as *what would happen if I mixed muggle moonshine with fizzing wizzbees?* “What benefit could Minister Malfoy possibly gain from calling a meeting of Wizengamot heirs before the Wizengamot sits on the first of August?”

“Politics,” Theo says promptly. Magnus grins. “He hopes to sway the heirs.”

“Why would that matter?” Harry frowns. “I mean, they can’t sit or vote, right? Not unless they are Lords apparent with proxies and that’s only me and Neville and Millicent Bulstrode -,”

“And myself,” Theo swallows hard. Sometimes, it hits him, a powerful, brutal knowledge like the weight of those wild creatures Apollonius kept for Theo to hunt and be hunted by crashing against his back. He is a Lord apparent. When he turns seventeen in four months, he will be a Lord. The youngest in the Wizengamot, at least until Bulstrode takes hers in January and then Harry and Longbottom in July. He will have to steer his seat, which for aeons before his father sat down beside Tom Riddle at his first Hogwarts feast was known as a traditionally grey one, into neutral waters. Lord Greengrass will be his ally at a cost and as long as the war goes on, the pressure to vote with Minister Malfoy and the others who hold Dark seats out in the open, like Lord Flint, Lord Parkinson and Lord Fawley will be always upon him. Perhaps it will only grow if Malfoy overturns the law that says Wizengamot members who have been imprisoned in Azkaban cannot vote again in their lifetimes. *Heart be the bolder*, Theo thinks to himself.

“Lucius has just discovered that his heir is compromised by loyalty to another heir,” Magnus dips another Viennese biscuit in his coffee. “He might now be considering the political value in the children around him.”

“He wants to use them,” Harry glowers. “Motherfucker.”

“Riddle has always prided himself on his ability to convert people to his cause, especially in their youth,” Magnus says. “Whether the idea is all Lucius’ or Tom’s, is impossible to say.”

“It is doomed to failure,” Theo says, raising his eyebrows at Harry. “Alliances have already been made.”

“Oh, do tell,” Magnus brushes crumbs from his fingertips with a grin. “What delicious plan have you concocted?”

“It was Fred and Blaise,” Harry says. “I’ve been signing Bear wands and No Wands treaties with a ton of people.”

“Do you know whom?” Magnus asks, setting his coffee aside with a familiar, scheming glint in his eye.

“Of the Wizengamot heirs, he has bear wands treaties with Abbot, MacMillan, Wolpert, Bones, and Fawley,” Theo says.

“I have others, but their not Wizengamot seats, mainly Gryffindors at school,” Harry says. Magnus has asked Kreacher for a piece of paper and is writing on the back of a receipt from the local supermarket. “Colin, Alicia, Angelina, Lee ...”

“He has no wands treaties too, with other Wizengamot heirs,” Theo says, pulling up the mental list that Blaise updates for him whenever it changes. “Shafiq, Goyle, Belby, Wenlock, Greengrass, Selwyn and Smith.”

“Under protest,” Harry mutters. Theo smirks. Blaise has complained endlessly about Harry’s stubborn refusal to take a treaty from Zacharias Smith but finally, Harry caved last week under pressure from Fred Weasley to just ‘get the fuck on with it.’ George Weasley reasoned that if Smith has a no-wands treaty with Harry, then the very worst he can do to him is be very annoying. Theo hopes Smith is eaten by the giant squid but the no wands treaty is a good idea.

“There are others who stand with you without treaties, too,” Theo points out.

“Oh yeah, I’ve got a House in Arms with Neville,” Harry adds. “He’s got a Wizengamot seat.”

“And your bond with Lovegood,” Theo says, “and obviously with the Weasleys.”

“Wait, Luna and the Weasley’s have Wizengamot seats?” Harry stares.

“Wizengamot seats are inherited, Harry, but they take financial input to maintain,” Magnus explains and Theo is glad. He doesn’t want to point out to Harry how poverty has cut some of his closest friends off from lawmaking.

“Well, that’s shit,” Harry frowns. “Magnus, let’s get Bill his seat back.”

Magnus stops writing for a moment. He and Theo share a look.

“Harry,” Theo begins. “Do you know how much that costs?”

“Is it so much that I won’t be able to buy my textbooks?” Harry asks blankly. Magnus snorts with laughter and Kreacher slaps pastry down on the counter, glaring at Harry.

“Master must try to be less stupid,” Kreacher snarls. “Master is a twice named Lord and has inherited the wealth of the Black Prince! He must be less obtuse.”

“Alright, alright, be nice to me or I won’t draw eyes on the aubergine,” Harry protests, flushing and sinking down into the sofa. “So I’m, like, really rich?”

Theo stares at him. He cannot believe Harry has not put this together already.

“Yes,” Theo says.

“No,” Magnus smiles. “You have property and heirlooms and influence. You do not have a vast mountain of gold at your disposal. There is gold in your Potter heir account that will service you until majority.”

“He means yes,” Theo says. Heirlooms are easily converted into a mountain of gold, especially if one has such a strong connection with the goblins, like Harry.

“Huh.” Harry seems to be thinking hard. “Well, if I don’t have a vast mountain of gold at my disposal and if we’ll need a vast mountain of it to get Bill’s seat sorted, then let’s sell some shit. Let’s get some cash out. What can we sell?”

“Master will sell none of the ancient and precious artefacts of the House of Black,” Kreacher snarls and throws a wrinkled tomato at Harry’s head. “Master promised to keep them safe!”

“Oh yeah, I did do that,” Harry frowns as he catches it with one hand. Theo stares admirably. Even if Harry’s grip is weakened and he immediately drops the tomato into his lap, he still has excellent reflexes. *Such a seeker*. “What about houses?”

“You want to sell properties?” Theo stares. Heirlooms are one thing but houses are another. Wixen hoard and covet property. *A safe space, Theodore, away from Muggles and the threat of discovery*, was what Apollonius had always said about the Castle in Ireland.

“I mean, yeah, a house is just a house,” Harry shrugs. He reaches for a felt-tip pen that’s been left on the coffee table and begins to draw shaky eyes on the tomato.

“No, Harry, wixen houses are magically entrenched,” Theo explains, trying to be patient. The idea of selling the Castle in Ireland or Nott Manor makes his skin itch. *Muggle raised, he was muggle raised*. “They are not just houses.”

“What does that mean, magically entrenched?” Harry frowns. “They can’t be sold?”

“No, they can,” Magnus says easily and Theo glowers at him. “It is just that many purebloods, particularly those in the Sacred Twenty Eight, have a dislike of doing so.”

“Because it is practically giving magical ground away,” Theo scowls. “No gold is worth that.”

“But ... we need gold.” Harry stares at him blankly. “We don’t need a load of magical ground.” Harry looks at Magnus. “How many houses do I have?”

“The Blacks have on two in the United Kingdom. There is Ludlow Castle and Grimmauld Place, which is unfortunately no more, and Remus now holds the last in France.” Magnus says. “From what I remember of Fleamont Potter’s investments, he held the house at Godric’s Hollow and a mansion in Cornwall though I believe it is no longer in use.”

“Yeah, Falmouth,” Harry says reflectively, passing the tomato between his hands. “Does that mean it’s got no magic?”

“It likely has not, since it has no spellwork to maintain it, like Godric’s Hollow does,” Magnus muses. “Also, Unlike Orion, Fleamont also invested money in Muggle property too.”

“Really?” Theo is surprised. The Potters were as pureblood as any.

“I believe he saw the value in the late seventies,” Magnus says tactfully.

“When James married Mum,” Harry says. He nods firmly. “Well, if magic houses are problematic -,”

“They are not,” Magnus says lightly. “I have sold many over my many years.”

“They are,” Theo scowls at him. Just because Bane lives long enough to find and create other magical houses does not mean they all can afford to throw them away. *But Harry could live forever too.* Theo pushes that thought away.

“Let’s sell the ground Grimmauld Place was on. There’s no Black Magic in it now,” Harry says, “and the Potter mansion.”

“Harry,” Theo stares at him, hardly understanding the ease at which Harry is prepared to let these places, steeped in magical history, disappear from his grip. “Why not sell the muggle property?”

“Because the exchange rate is shit,” Harry frowns at him. “Obviously.”

“What do you mean?” Theo asks.

“The current rate is five muggle pounds to a galleon,” Magnus says quietly. “We will not get as much value for our coin by selling muggle property.”

“Harry,” Theo feels slightly desperate at the idea of the Potter mansion, *the Potter Mansion*, being sold at market. “You have enough gold to live on, you don’t need to do this.”

“But not enough to buy Bill’s seat and do the other stuff that matters,” Harry says, shrugging. “Theo, I’ve never even *been* there. Everything that was in it is probably already in the Potter vault. If there’s no magic left there, why should I care about some old house?”

“Because it’s your history,” Theo snaps. “Would you sell Godric’s Hollow?”

Harry’s scowl is immediate and dark.

“I’d knock whatever’s left of it down and bulldozer the crap out of it if I could,” Harry’s voice is curt. “Why would I keep a place where I only have terrible memories?”

Theo does not understand. He has no good memories of Nott Manor and still, he would never sell a brick of it. *But then my family was never obliterated by a Dark Lord there.*

“Well, we can’t sell Godric’s Hollow at present, it is partly owned by Albus,” Magnus says.

“Of course it is,” Harry mutters, tossing the tomato up and catching it.

“So what is the other stuff that matters, Harry?” Magnus asks gently. “How else do you want to use your money?”

“Getting this creature legislation changed,” Harry scowls. “Do we do that with money or voting, what happens?”

Theo can’t stop staring at Harry. He feels an odd mix of utterly bemused and absurdly proud. *He’s realising who he is, even if he’s doing it completely differently from how I expected.*

“A little of one a lot of the other,” Magnus says with a grin. “But if Lord Weasley is happy to accept our gift, then we can have him voting the day after tomorrow.”

“Good,” Harry nods. “We’ll need votes, right? How many?”

“Let me worry about votes and legislation, Harry,” Magnus smiles. “Remus and I have got it in hand. All you need to worry about is the Heir meeting tomorrow.”

“Right,” Harry frowns. “What do I have to do?”

“A show of power,” Theo says quietly. “You need to show the Minister that there is a large portion of the heirs who won’t be swayed.”

“Forty percent,” Magnus says, counting down the list. Theo stares at him. He had not realised it was so much. At this moment, he respects the ambition of Fred Weasley, who decided to plot a coup d’état sixty years in advance. Now his plans do not seem so far-fetched.

“Okay, I can do that,” Harry nods. “And I’m going as what? I’m not an heir anymore, am I?”

“You’re the Black Lord apparent and you have not yet named a Black heir, so you are your own heir,” Theo says.

“Um, actually, I made a plan about that,” Harry says, looking at Theo guiltily. “Sorry, I was going to talk to you about it. Magnus and I only chatted this morning and Severus says I have to do it, like, immediately.”

“It’s an excellent plan,” Magnus grins. “If unconventional.”

“Who?” Theo demands. He cannot imagine who Harry will name. The only logical choice is Draco and that’s not going to happen.

“Kreacher,” Harry says flippantly.

There is a crash. Kreacher has dropped the mixing bowl and both him and Magnus are covered in the cake batter. Hedwig takes off with a screech and zooms around in the air above them before landing on Harry’s shoulder and glaring at Kreacher in betrayal before sharply starting to clean her feathers. Kreacher stares at Harry with wide, astonished eyes.

“Master names ... Kreacher?” Kreacher whispers. He looks like a small storm is brewing over his head. “Master names KREACHER?”

“Kreacher -,” Harry tries to speak.

“It is not done, it SHALL NOT BE DONE!” Kreacher wails, immediately bursting into floods of furious tears. “The line of Black shall die with Kreacher! It shall all be Master’s fault! Master is SELFISH! IT IS IGNOBLE!”

“Alright, calm down, I was going to say that you get to choose a *wixen* to hold the heirship and guide them, so you’re not my heir like *that*, not exactly, I’m not fucking stupid you ridiculous emotional numpty!” Harry yells back.

“Perhaps you should have been clearer,” Theo says, trying not to smirk.

“Yes, quite.” Magnus is wiping cake batter out of his eyes.

“Master ... Master will not end the house of Black?” Kreacher sniffs, glaring at Harry.

“No, although I don’t understand how having an elf heir would be such a big deal - Okay, okay!” Harry exclaims hurriedly, as Kreacher starts wailing again. “Don’t be my heir! I don’t like you anyway! Just choose someone, for flip’s sake!”

“It would be a big deal Harry, because house elves cannot hold property nor hold seats of government,” Magnus says, wiping cake batter off the lapels of his floral shirt. “Kreacher is right. To name an elf would be to collapse the House of Black, which is why it is better that Kreacher chooses an heir he can work well with, as we planned.”

“This is surely only a symbolic appointment anyway since Harry is Lord Black and Heirs have no Wizengamot function truly, beyond status and this meeting, apparently,” Theo says, hoping to calm Kreacher down. The elf sniffs and glares at them all, eyes flooded.

“So Kreacher only chooses Wixen to carry on the House of Black in case Master has no children?” Kreacher croaks slowly.

“And you will guide them, Kreacher, teach them the ways of Black,” Magnus says gently. “Just as you have always done.”

“So choose someone!” Harry snaps at Kreacher. “You twit.”

“Master truly means it?” Kreacher whimpers. “Kreacher shall choose?”

“Yes, you idiot,” Harry throws a box of tissues at Kreacher’s head. The elf catches them and blows his nose noisily. “So get on with it.”

“Kreacher chooses the Weasley,” Kreacher snuffles, voice becoming stronger. “The guardsman to the House of Black with the magic Master says smells like pixie-eye sweeties.”

“Pixie-eye sweeties?” Magnus repeats.

Theo doesn’t understand at all, but Harry nods happily.

“He means aniseed balls,” Harry says and Theo grimaces. They are another muggle sweet Theo thinks could be rightly used as a punishment for small children. “And it’s George, good choice. We can flog him today and get it sorted, right Magnus?”

“Yes, and George is actually partly a Black through his grandmother anyway, so it works well,” Magnus nods.

Harry nods happily and turns to Theo.

“Okay?” He asks.

You asked a house elf, a creature of indentured servitude, to name and guide the next Lord of the most powerful magical House in Britain and he chose George bloody Weasley, the third son of a house of no note. Theo feels like the world is on a tilt. He nods, mutely.

“Kreacher stop staring at me like that,” Harry grumbles.

“Kreacher does not stare Master stares,” Kreacher snaps back, wiping his eyes on a tea towel.

“I’m only staring because you look so weird!”

“Master is weird, and an affront to House of Black!” Kreacher snarls.

“I let you name my heir!” Harry protests, throwing a cookie that’s sitting on the coffee table at Kreacher. Hedwig immediately stretches her wings and catches it mid-flight, before soaring to her perch by the bookcase. Theo sighs inwardly. Food fights seem to be a stalwart of Harry and Kreacher’s communication style and Theo could do without it.

“Is an affront that Master thinks he will *ever* give up the Black Lordship,” Kreacher growls. “Master will *always* be Lord Black.”

“That seems unlikely,” Harry quips, flopping back down on the sofa. “What with my talent for dying on repeat.”

“Don’t,” Theo says tautly. It is too close to the bone, especially now he is enduring Harry’s nightmares on a daily basis. It’s quite something, to get used to Severus Snape or Remus Lupin bursting into his bedroom twice a night to help guide Harry out of magical terror and administer potions, if necessary. Even if Harry seems to be improving with Theo here, Theo thinks he will never get used to the sight of Professor Snape in pyjamas and is quite looking forward to going back to Hogwarts where he will have to care for Harry at night with only Kreacher for help. He’s planning to adjust to less sleep and drink more coffee.

“To be fair, Harry, whilst you might make a habit of visiting with Lady Death you seem to still be with us,” Magnus says, using Kreacher’s tea towel to get cake better out of his hair.

“Master can live forever like Mr Bane so Master will,” Kreacher snarls threateningly. “Or Kreacher will murder him.”

“That seems redundant,” Theo leans against the sofa and strokes Harry’s hair. It’s always easier to talk about Harry’s deaths or Harry’s possible immortality when they are touching. The bond calms him. Harry grins up at him fondly and hisses gently.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

You better not, Theo thinks firmly. Harry snickers. Then Harry’s face changes.

“Wait,” Harry sits up, staring at Theo. “You.”

“Me?” Theo asks.

“You don’t have a treaty with me, you *can’t* have a treaty with me,” Harry looks at Magnus. “But if you go tomorrow without one then you’ll have to take whatever Malfoy’s offering.”

“Ah,” Magnus gives up and clicks his fingers, swopping his shirt for a lurid green silk kimono that actually makes Theo’s eyes hurt. “Yes, that could be a problem.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Theo says calmly. He has already thought of this. He’s been thinking of it at the back of his mind since he read the letter.

“How is it fine?” Harry says, a little desperately.

“Because I am the ward of Lord Greengrass,” Theo says simply. “I might be the Nott Lord apparent but I’m not a voting Lord until I’m seventeen, just like you and Longbottom, and until then, Lord Greengrass votes by proxy for me. I have to follow Daphne’s lead.”

“Thank God,” Harry flops back. “For a second I thought we were in trouble.”

“Oh yes,” Theo says sarcastically, “we have to confront the Minister for Magic and reveal to everyone that you’ve been plotting a coup d’etat but no, we’re not in trouble.”

“I’ve not been plotting anything, that’s all Blaise and Fred,” Harry quips. “I’ve just been signing letters.”

“Leviohsa, Leviosah,” Theo says.

“Huh?” Harry stares.

“He means *tomahto*, *tomahto*,” Magnus says, though Theo has no idea what vegetables have to do with anything.

“Oh, that’s funny,” Harry grins. “Leviohsa, leviosah, Hermione will love that.”

“I take it that Severus and Remus are not aware of your political machinations?” Magnus smirks.

“No,” Theo says.

“Severus will kill me,” Harry says factually. Theo reasons that he is probably right.

“Well, better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission,” Theo says.

“That’s always been my motto,” Magnus’ eyes twinkle. “You realise, Theodore, that tomorrow you shall have to return to the Greengrass home? At least for a couple of days, perhaps a week. The eyes of the Minister will likely be following the dissident heirs very closely.”

“That,” Harry says forcefully, “is a really shitty birthday present.”

Theo smirks softly and tugs Harry’s hair. Harry makes a soft growling noise like an irritated kitten and huffs out air through his nose. Theo smiles. The nice thing about Magnus, who Harry seems to have adopted as some sort of quasi big brother as well as a Steward and mentor, is that Theo never feels awkward about showing affection in front of him. He also knows that, unlike Lupin or Snape, when Magnus presents the likelihood that Theo will have to leave Harry’s side for the next month, he does so without malice or self-interest. Magnus has made it very clear, from the way he consistently asks Theo how he is and how his bond with Harry feels to him, that he believes that Theo is good for Harry, unlike Lupin, who eyes Theo like he’s two seconds away from snapping his jaws at him like a rabid dog. If Magnus says that Theo needs to go back to the Greengrass House, Theo will go. He knows, even after a few short days together, that things will be better.

"It'll be okay," Theo strokes his hair. "We'll have fun."

"At the fucking Wizengamot? I don't think so," Harry snorts and shakes his head. "This means you can't come to my party."

"I couldn't come anyway," Theo reminds him. There is a small gathering at the Weasleys with Harry's Gryffindor friends. For obvious reasons, there are no Slytherin students on the the guest list excluding Blaise, who has sent his apologies from Venice. Although Theo thinks privately that Blaise, who has apparently even been given a key to the flat above the Weasley jokeshop, secretly doesn't want to brave meeting Mrs Weasley yet.

"Yeah but I was going to sneak you in under the invisibility cloak," Harry mutters, pouting.

"Through a floo?" Theo smirks at him. "Subtle."

"It's my middle name, Nott."

"There's nothing to say you cannot meet up," Magnus says with a grin. "After all, tomorrow you will reveal you have a treaty with Heir Greengrass."

"That's true," Theo says, playing with the ear cuff at the top of Harry's ear that the goblin king gave him. Theo tries to ignore the fact he finds it very fucking sexy. "Daphne and I could take you to the British Museum as a late birthday excursion."

"To see the dinosaurs?" Harry's eyes light up and Theo wants to kiss his nose.

"And the exhibition of ancient Norse texts, though I suspect that is less interesting to you," Theo teases.

"Yeah, a bit," Harry snorts. "We could bring Ron, he'll look at dinosaurs with me. And we can see if Hermione wants to get a portkey from France, see if she and Daphne want to double date."

"Daphne and Hermione?" Magnus pipes up, eyes hyper-focused on the possibility of gossip. "Interesting."

"Yes, it is interesting that Harry wants to sabotage our friends with double dates," Theo drawls. "Because sabotaging the plans of the Minister of Magic surely wasn't enough."

"Rude," Harry pulls a pillow up and throws it at Theo's face. "Dinosaurs don't make up for you leaving on my birthday."

Theo knows it doesn't, but for Theo, what makes up for it all is the feeling that Harry doesn't want him to leave. After a month of Harry keeping secrets, it finally feels like Harry wants him again. It feels right, and for that, Theo is sure he can endure a little time apart. Soon, he'll be back in Spinners End and it won't matter. *And soon we'll be back at Hogwarts. He'll be in my bed every night. It will be okay.* Besides, he and Kreacher have made plans to ensure Harry's birthday will be perfectly memorable, even without a trip back to the Ministry of Magic.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure it's a good birthday," Theo kisses the top of his head. "I promise."

— — — — —

Harry dreams.

The three points of the triangle are shrouded in mist. One still burns, brightly, the other two are obscured in smoke.

“Why do they do that?” Harry asks. The Grim rubs against his leg.

“There are ways to light them,” Death stands by his side. “The names are a good place to start.”

“The names?” Harry pets Padfoot’s head absentmindedly.

“The names.”

“Don’t have anything clearer for me?” Harry asks. Death’s eyes are full of laughter.

“All things in their time, Master.”

— — — — —

“Harry, wake up.”

“No,” Harry moans, pressing his face into the pillow. “Don’t want to.”

“Come on,” a soft voice chuckles above him. Harry feels a warm kiss on his cheek. He groans and rolls over and the kiss moves to his rune mark, bringing tingles with it. In the remnants of his dream, bluebirds flutter their gold-dipped wings. *Theo*. “I’ve got a surprise.”

“Theo,” Harry opens his eyes and sees Theo has dressed already, sitting on the bed and holding one of Remus’ old jumpers. Theo often wakes up early now, he’s been reading the books Narcissa’s been sending and spending time meditating. Harry’s tried to join him but Harry is very, very bad at meditating. But even this seems early for Theo. Very dim, cold light is filtering through the round window. Hedwig is munching on a mouse on the window ledge, looking at them curiously, as if surprised that they should be awake during her quiet, hunting hours. “What’s going on?”

“Happy birthday,” Theo smiles. “Put this on.”

Harry sits up groggily, Sahara around his neck, and pulls the jumper over his head.

Your grey one is happy.

It’s a birthday thing.

“Okay,” Harry rubs his fists against his eyes. “What’s my surprise?”

“Put some socks on,” Theo hands him some, “and your trainers.”

“Are we going outside?” Harry frowns.

“I got permission to leave the wards for an hour,” Theo says. “So we should be quick.”

“Where are we going?” Harry pulls on socks and his trainers.

“You’ll see,” Theo smiles. “Kreacher?”

Kreacher appears and grabs Harry’s hand.

“All is ready,” he says gruffly.

“What is ready?” Harry demands.

“You’ll see!”

Then Harry is moving through time and space wrapped in the bitter, coffee scent of Kreacher’s magic, sort of like a portkey but less jerky, and then he feels soft grass beneath his feet. He smells water and green reeds. Harry looks around. They are standing in the garden of Fabiola’s Cottage, the sun beginning to dawn a reddish pink light into the fading blue. Harry looks behind him. There’s a picnic blanket spread over a path of damp grass, and Kreacher is setting out a thermos and mugs.

“Theo,” Harry whispers. Sahara slithers down Harry’s arm.

I shall swim.

Don’t drown, Harry thinks back dazedly.

“Come here,” Theo tugs Harry’s hand gently and he sits down, pulling Harry against his chest and watching the tall reeds blow in the breeze. Harry thinks it might be the most beautiful morning he’s ever seen.

“Wow,” Harry says. “This is a good way to start what is definitely going to be a rubbish birthday.”

“This will make it not a rubbish birthday,” Theo says firmly.

“Is this my birthday present then?” Harry asks. “Getting out of Spinners End?”

“No, this is.”

Harry looks down. Theo is holding a key in his hand. Harry is instantly wary, given that the skeleton key Apollonius left Theo is made of literal bone, but it looks like a normal enough small iron key.

“Thank you,” Harry takes it carefully and lets it sit small in the palm of his hand. “Am I ...? Theo, is this some kind of Wixen pureblood tradition I’m supposed to instantly understand?”

“No, this is metaphorical,” Theo smiles. “I’ve got an actual gift for you too but this is ... this is my fifth gift.”

“Your fifth gift?” Harry repeats. They’ve not talked about the fifth gift yet, not beyond a very vague conversation about heart-bonding and how it would be new for both of them. *The fifth gift shall be a gift that symbolises a new experience for both courtiers.*

“I’ve keyed you into the wards here, and ...” Theo hesitates, “I’ve made you a Secret Keeper here.”

“You can do that?” Harry whispers, staring at Theo. Theo nods. He looks hesitant.

“I don’t ... I wonder if ...”

“Theo,” Harry squeezes the key in his hand. “What’s going on?”

“I have always thought that if I were to live anywhere when I turned seventeen, I would live here,” Theo says quietly. “I want to do that with you, Harry.”

“So ...” Harry feels his heartbeat beginning to race. “The fifth courting gift is ...”

“Here. Something that’s ours.” Theo says simply. It’s perfect.

“Something that’s ours,” Harry repeats softly. Theo nods.

“Do you ... like it?”

Like doesn’t quite cover it but Harry leans forward and kisses Theo’s cheek.

“I love it, thank you,” Harry smiles. “It’s perfect.”

“You’re perfect,” Theo whispers back. Harry feels his words floating through the bond. *I love you so much.*

“You too,” Harry smiles. He leans against Theo and allows Theo to pull him close. He breathes in the scent of treacle and thunderstorms. Harry doesn’t hold much stock in birthday wishes because if they were true, then Vernon Dursley would have exploded into smithereens in 1985, but he allows him a small one. *I wish this, this forever.* Then a soft gift is dropped into his lap. Harry looks down at the gentle fabric it is wrapped in. “Is this ... one of your jumpers?”

“It is,” Theo smirks. “Since you enjoy them so much.”

“This is the most sarcastic present anyone’s given me,” Harry snorts.

“Unwrap it, then.”

Harry does, pulling the soft fabric in darkest blue off something solid underneath. He sees a familiar leather journal and smiles.

“Is this so we don’t have to keep adding pages to our old ones?” Harry jokes.

“Something like that,” Theo smiles. Harry turns the journal in his hands. It’s no longer green, but a very deep blue, though the silver lettering of H P B S P is the same.

“You changed the colour?”

Theo nods.

“Less conspicuous,” he says. “Carrying around a Slytherin green journal could be risky now, and there’s this -,”

He pulls out his wand and taps the letters. They reform into the coat of arms of the House of Black.

“Nice touch,” Harry smiles. “What else?”

“Why would you think there was more?” Theo raises his eyebrows. Harry rolls his eyes.

“Come on, impress me, Nott,” he drawls. Theo’s eyes alight with mischief.

“I shall try,” Theo smirks. He pulls out a journal from his own pocket, a new black one with silver lettering on it. Harry touches it with a smile. *Blue for the House of Nott, Black for the House of Black.*

“You don’t think you carrying a Black journal and me carrying blue might be conspicuous?” Harry jokes.

“Unlikely,” Theo smiles. “Hold yours.”

Harry does. Theo pulls out his biro, the one that Harry gave him last year and Harry smiles fondly, reminds himself to pop to the co-op on Cokeworth high street and get Theo some more. Then Theo writes something in his diary. As soon as he sets pen to paper, Harry feels the leather in his hands warm like a hot water bottle. Harry gasps and stares down at the journal, seeing Theo’s message arrive.

A heat warning, so I never miss a message.

“How did you do this?” Harry whispers.

“It’s a ward,” Theo says quietly. “It’s based on some of the alert systems used in Muggle security, Granger loaned me a book, but also on some of the goblin wards that Weasley used here.”

“Those are *Anzar* secrets,” Harry says.

“I can read a little *khuzdul*,” Theo shrugs.

Harry stares at Theo, caught off guard by the astonishing intelligence of Theodore Nott, the boy who can read *khuzdul* as well as about four other languages, who is always reading, learning, inventing and honing his mind. *This is the boy who loves me.*

“How are you not a Ravenclaw?” Harry blurts out. “How?”

“You’re not the only one who made a choice, Harry,” Theo smiles. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Yes please,” Harry says. Kreacher pours them both some and Theo hands Kreacher a wagon wheel, which he immediately unwraps. Kreacher sits beside Harry and dips the chocolate biscuit into Harry’s coffee before starting to munch. Harry sips and contemplates the notion that perhaps, just like him, Theo had sat under the sorting hat and wished for the house he thought he should be

in. *I could have been a Slytherin, he could have been a Ravenclaw. Would it have made a difference?*

“How’s your mind-shield?” Harry asks, because it is the most Ravenclaw thing ever to pursue oclumency by a four hundred year old method that Severus says is ‘more academic than practical.’

“It’s okay,” Theo says quietly.

“You want me to test it yet?”

“Can you?” Theo raises his eyebrows. “I didn’t know you could cast the legilimency charm.”

“Um, yeah, sort of,” Harry sips his coffee. “I’ve cast it on Snape that time and on Petunia.”

“Oh, I thought you cast the memory charm on your Aunt, it was in parseltongue.”

“Yeah, it was,” Harry lets Kreacher dip the wagon wheel into his coffee, leaning traces of chocolate on the rim. “So you want to test?”

Harry’s sort of excited to see the mind-shield. Whenever he thinks of it he imagines Theo standing with the Potter shield in the Shrieking shack.

“Maybe later,” Theo squeezes him close. Harry nestles a little nearer and enjoys the warmth of the coffee of his chilled lips and the feeling of Theo’s body-heat encasing him from the cold air. “Edges okay?”

“Okay,” Harry smiles. It’s getting easier, Theo asking this every day. The edges seem softer. “How’s the memories?”

Theo’s told him about memories of Apollonius, his voice surfacing in Theo’s mind. Harry has some experience of how that feels. Not that Voldemort and Theo’s shit Dad are equivalent.

“Better since I started focusing on my shield,” Theo sips some coffee and then kisses Harry, his nose cold and his lips delightfully warm and bitter- tasting.

“Your nose is cold,” Harry mutters, rubbing it with his own. Theo snorts and lets him.

“You’re never cold,” Theo whispers. “Not anymore. Too much magic.”

“That’s weird,” Harry shivers. “I feel cold more these days.”

Since the cage. Harry knows he doesn’t need to say it.

“Put this on,” Theo hands Harry the jumper his journal was wrapped in. Harry pulls it on, breathing in the soft scent of Theo’s deodorant and the warm smell of lingering sweat. Harry nestles back against Theo and feels instantly warmer. “Are you going to be okay at the Ministry today?”

Harry thinks about the last time he was there. The cold marble floor under his back, trembling with pain and exhaustion, too tired to even stand and face Tom. *Too tired to keep living.* Yet here he is, still surviving. He remembers Severus’ voice after Umbridge: *Resilience is your gift, farzandam.*

“I guess I’ll have to be,” Harry says quietly.

“I’ll be there the whole time,” Theo kisses his hair. “You won’t be alone.”

Harry sighs deeply, breathing in the scent of cold water and damp grass. He watches the sky lighten over the lake and wonders if there is anywhere more peaceful than right here. The prospect of the being in the ministry again, of seeing Malfoy and standing in the atrium again, is a little terrifying, but it’s hard to care when he’s here, in the tall grass, with Theo.

“I love it here,” Harry whispers.

“I’m glad. We ...” Theo pauses and fixes his silvery eyes on the rising sun. His voice is soft, almost sad. “We could be happy here, I think.”

Harry pauses to blow on his mug. He sees Sahara slithering across the shallows of the lake, chasing fish. He knows what’s missing from Theo’s words: *if we get the chance to be*. Harry feels like he cannot even think that far ahead, as if a cloud covers the future entirely. Yet it is nice, almost like a dream, to contemplate the possibility of it.

“Yeah,” Harry leans his head on Theo’s shoulder. “I think we could be.”

“Happy birthday,” Theo whispers into his hair.

“Yeah,” Harry grins. “It is.”

— — —

“Potter! Harry Potter! Are you here for the Ministers Meeting?”

“Potter-Black! Did you see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in May?”

“Harry! Are you the Chosen One?”

“This,” Harry says quietly as he walks into the Ministry for magic with Magnus by his side, “is fucking awful.”

They are surrounded on all sides by reporters. With every flash of the camera, Harry remembers lying on the polished floor by the fountain, the agony of torture and possession pulsing horribly through his body. There are other heirs arriving, many are being photographed but none of them is being yelled at. They are staring at Harry too, some he recognises others he doesn’t.

“You are not alone,” Magnus says, taking his hand supportively. He’s wearing a black suit embroidered with silver and seems to glow in the camera flash.

“Harry! Harry Potter! Is that a new boyfriend? What happened to Heir Zabini?”

“Fuck off,” Harry mutters under his breath. He wishes Sahara was here to bite them, but Remus cautioned against it since invisible things cannot stay invisible inside the Ministry (like House Elves) and he thought it might be an unhelpful image to have Harry strolling around with a snake on his neck. Harry thinks it might be actually very helpful right now.

“Harry! How do you feel about the death of your father, the murderer, Sirius Black, who was successfully captured and kissed by dementors this summer?”

“Are you kidding?” Harry stops and turns, scowling as he searches for the voice.

“No, Harry,” Magnus tugs him gently. “Come on.”

“Sir, Sir! Are you dating an underage wizard? Did he seek you out? He has a tendency for that.” A sly, horrible voice emerges. Harry recognises it. *Rita Skeeter.*

“Are you fucking stupid?” Harry demands. The clicks of cameras increase, the reporters staring at him eagerly. Harry’s glad that he’s wearing what he thinks is a really good outfit. An old pair of Hermione’s trousers in black and grey herringbone, a black shirt of Magnus’ that is high necked in a way that reminded Harry of Severus’ shirts, with sleeves that puff out at the forearms and then tighten at the wrists with many buttons. Magnus has loaned him a pair of patent boots with chains on them and Harry threw his green dress robes on top, open. When he walked down the stairs this morning, he was confronted by Severus and Remus staring at him.

“Goodness Harry,” Remus whispers. He looks very wan, he has apparated back from Skye this morning just to see Harry off. He’ll be back to Skye tonight. The moon is full for two more nights. “You look ... very impressive.”

Severus takes one look at him and disappears upstairs. Harry wonders if he’s so insulted by Harry’s look he’s just walked off, but he comes back downstairs holding out a pair of green and black striped braces towards Harry.

“Those trousers are too big,” Severus says shortly. “We need to increase your nutrition potion intake.”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbles, as Kreacher helps him clip the braces to the back of his trousers. He looks down at the elf. “I’ll do?”

“No,” Kreacher snarls and clicks his fingers. Harry’s bottle green robes are replaced with robes so dark green that they have the iridescent blackish quality of a starling’s wing. There is a huge black and silver raven, mid-flight, on the back of the robes and they are lined with silver. The fastening at the top is a simple setting of silver raven heads, joined by small silver chains. “Better.”

Harry feels the Black Magic inside him caw with happy delight.

“What are you, Kreacher? A secret fashion designer?” Harry shakes his head.

“Those are the Black Lordship robes,” Severus says quietly. Remus nods mutely, staring at Harry. He wonders if Sirius ever wore them. He imagines that Sirius probably tried to burn them.

“Kreacher just has impeccable taste,” Kreacher snorts. “Unlike Master who has none.”

“Your axe,” Severus says quietly. “You cannot wear it in the shoulder holster. It must be visible. Weapons in the Ministry must always be visible.”

“Okay,” Harry unbuckles his shoulder holster and lets Kreacher help him strap the dragon-hide hip holster around his waist and buckle the axe in. Harry is comforted by its weight but still feels

the most overdressed ever been. He's not cut out for this pureblood dressing, not like Theo, who would look amazing in it, Harry is sure. "I feel like I look like a complete tosser."

"You don't, you are the Lord Black apparent and the youngest Anzar in centuries," Remus said, patting his shoulder. "You look like him now."

Harry had felt a bit conspicuous apparating to London and standing in the bloody phone box, had felt irritated by the stupid glasses he has to get used to wearing again. Now he's glad, because he can glare at Rita Skeeter and feel like if, on the off-chance, Tom Riddle happens to read the Daily Prophet tomorrow, he'll see that Harry looks fucking cool. *Take your cage and stuff it, Tom.*

"After Heir Diggory, anyone would think you have a thing for an older man, Harry!" Rita's voice bounces. He catches sight of the edge of her glasses. "Do you seek out notoriety, Harry? Is it an unhealthy pattern, given your clear lack of responsible father figures?"

He sees a few of the surrounding reporters' smirk. Harry's hit with a flash of a memory of Cedric, the first one in a long time.

Cedric, pinning Harry beneath him in a practice duel session in the Charms classroom. "You need to watch out for the flipping curse, Harry."

"Well, thank you for that, Professor Diggory." Harry grins up at him, watching Cedric's warm, slow smile.

"Do you have a thing for older guys, then?" Cedric leans closer, brushing his lips against Harry's nose. Harry reaches up to kiss him, grabbing his gold tie to draw him close.

"I have a thing for you."

Drown it, Harry tells himself. He throws the book of Cedric into the water inside the library of his mind and glares at Skeeter.

"I dunno, is shitty reporting your pattern?" Harry says loudly.

"You go down, Harry, I will deal with the reporters," Magnus says. His voice is light and friendly but Harry feels the certainty and steel in his tone. "I'll be outside afterwards."

"Fine," Harry glares at Skeeter. "But she hates me, so watch out."

"I can handle it," Magnus smiles tightly. As Harry walks away, he hears Magnus' voice ringing through the atrium. "I am Magnus Bane and I am the Steward of the House of Black. I would like to remind all reporters that the Black Lord apparent is underage and we will be suing any publications that produce any reports that speculate upon the love life of a minor."

"You can't sue everyone, Mr Bane!" Skeeter calls back.

"I have the Black fortune and the Potter fortune at my disposal, I think you'll find I can," Magnus grins like a shark. "Any questions?"

There is silence. Harry smirks and shakes his head as he moves towards the lift. With a happy leap of his heart, he sees Daphne and Theo in the golden lift. Theo left Spinner's End as soon as they got back from Fabiola's Cottage this morning, taking the floo to the Greengrass House to prepare for the meeting. Harry's happy to see him and he jogs a little to catch up with them, sliding in as

Daphne holds the door for him. Theo gives him a quick, hungry and utterly delightful look that makes Harry long for their bedroom in Spinners End. Daphne notices.

“Please do not mount the Lord Black Apparent inside the lift, Theodore,” she murmurs.

“Fuck off,” Theo says curtly, but Harry sees a hint of a blush climbing on his cheeks and wants to kiss them.

“Harry!” They see Hermione walking quickly towards them. Harry grins. She looks the most traditionally wixen Harry’s ever seen her in red velvet robes but still, impossibly and wonderfully muggle. She’s wearing a matching tartan skirt, tie and blazer with a cream shirt and Harry just knows it’s something that’s been borrowed from her Mum’s “Inspired by Princess Di” collection. Her hair is half hidden by a red and gold head scarf that reminds Harry of the kind of thing the Contessa wears. “Wait for me.”

Harry holds the door.

“You look nice,” he says as she crosses over the threshold and the doors begin to close. “Cool shoes.”

“Thanks,” Hermione says breathlessly, looking down at her oxblood red loafers. “They’re my cousins. You look nice too.”

“That is ... an excellent blazer,” Daphne says, eyeing it almost covetously. “Is it Vivienne Westwood?”

“Um, no, it’s my Mum’s,” Hermione flushes. She looks a little flustered and smiles tightly at Daphne, brushing her hands against the red velvet robes. “Thank you for lending me the robes. My blue dress robes didn’t seem right.”

“You are most welcome, robes are traditional Wizengamot garb. There is no need for people to suggest you do not belong,” Daphne says evenly.

“Thank you,” she says.

Harry catches Theo’s eye. He’s looking irritatingly gorgeous, in his pure-blood prince robes, so dark blue they are almost as black as the night sky, an amazing leather waistcoat and blue shirt with the sexiest fucking leather sleeves that Harry’s ever seen and tall boots that Harry has never seen before but keeps staring at. *Why don’t I look at his legs more? Am I stupid?* Daphne, unsurprisingly, is wearing green, but a fresh teal-coloured top and dress that sweeps to the floor with a high neck closed with pearl buttons and robes that have mer-lions embroidered all over them. Hermione is staring at them carefully.

“This is lovely,” Hermione says.

“It is a banju karung,” Daphne says. Hermione nods. Harry watches in amusement as she stretches her fingers out and strokes the embroidery on the sleeve of Daphne’s robe. Daphne is very still, watching cautiously.

“The Merlion is the symbol of Singapore,” Hermione says quietly. Daphne raises her eyebrows but seems to be lost for words as long as Hermione is touching her sleeve.

“Of the Greengrass ancestry,” Theo says.

“Should I have worn something that’s more symbolic of the House of Potter?” Hermione is looking up at Daphne with a worried expression, removing her hand from Daphne’s robe.

“You wear a Potter ring and red is a traditional Potter colour, that’s all that matters.” Daphne says, who seems to have recovered her ability to speak. “Besides, you look beautiful.”

Hermione flushes and starts coughing uncontrollably. Theo rolls his eyes and Harry rubs her back sympathetically.

“Do you have a plan, Harry?” Daphne asks, pretending not to notice.

“Yeah,” Harry nods. “It just depends on what Malfoy does, what he’s offering.”

“If he tries to pressure them to align with Voldemort -,” Hermione coughs, eyes streaming.

“Then I’ll do something,” Harry reassures her. “Magnus has sent messages to everyone who has a treaty. They know who to expect.”

“This could be dangerous,” Daphne warns, her eyes glittering. “There are some who may suffer if they stand with you publicly.”

“They knew what it could mean,” Theo says. The back of his hand brushes against Harry’s. He smells of sharp rain on a hot day. “Those who take vows lightly are fools.”

“Is that a quote from Apollonius?” Daphne asks, eyebrows raised.

“No, it’s common sense,” Theo says.

"Speaking of common sense, Nott, how many O's?" Hermione demands, raising her eyebrows at Theo. Harry smirks. Hermione has been sending owls and floo notes demanding Theo's OWL results since they arrived yesterday and Theo has been refusing, replying only to say that he is 'quite satisfied.' Remus says it's cruel. Harry and Ron have been taking bets on how long until Hermione explodes and sends Theo a howler.

"Nine," Theo says. Hermione's eyes widen. Harry grins. She also got nine Outstanding's. After only having Harry and Ron's distinctly mediocre grades to compare herself to, Harry wonders how it feels for Hermione to finally be swimming with people more in her league. From the determined glint in her eye, it feels good.

"Which one?" she demands. "Which was your Exceeds Expectations?"

"How do you know it was an E?" Harry asks, grinning at Theo. "He could have got an A. Or a P."

Theo pinches him.

"Perish the thought," Daphne says.

"You're lucky I love you," Theo mutters to Harry and turns to Hermione. "My E was in Astrology. Yours?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Hermione looks at Daphne. "You?"

"I did not have an E," Daphne says, tucking a piece of her dark hair behind her ear. Half of it is pulled up in a glittering merlion comb.

"You got an A?" Hermione looks scandalised. Theo rolls his eyes and Harry smirks.

"No," Daphne says. Hermione stares at her for a moment and Harry waits for the moment to dawn.

"You - you got all -?" Hermione whispers.

"There it is," Harry murmurs to Theo, who smiles back.

"I did get a 90 on Care of Magical Creatures," Daphne says with a shrug. "But I have never been good with pets."

"Not ... good ... with ... pets?" Hermione is staring at Daphne like she doesn't know whether to huff because someone got better grades than her or throw herself at the poised girl who is currently frowning as she checks her fingernails. Hermione looks at Harry, seeming to be utterly bewildered. "I ...?"

Harry smiles pityingly and decides to put her out of her misery whilst Theo bites his lip and seems to be trying desperately not to laugh.

"Where is the meeting?" Harry asks.

"Courtroom ten," Daphne answers, completely unaware of the tizz she's put Hermione in.

"Ten?" Harry repeats, disbelievingly. "That's where my Wizengamot trial was."

"Typical," Hermione says, starting to recover as she looks at Harry. "Malfoy wants to unsettle you."

"It won't work," Theo says firmly. Harry wishes he was so sure. He watches the lift descend further. Theo holds his hand against the wall and Harry feels words float through the bond. *Courage*. Harry smiles and squeezes his hand, but then pulls away when the doors chime and open.

"Fancy seeing you here," George says with a grin. Harry grins back. George and Charlie are standing on the threshold, both looking more pureblood than he's ever seen them. It's then that Harry realises, the Weasleys never look like purebloods. Harry feels a strong flash of respect. "We were just visiting some work friends of Dad's."

Harry realises then that they are on level two. His stomach jerks, remembering how he met Kingsley and Mr Weasley here last summer. Mr Weasley's earnest, tender concern. *Where have you been, Harry?*

"Merlin above," George winces, pulling at the collar of his shirt. "This pureblood traditional stuff is a bit much, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I don't like to feel strangled by my clothes."

He's wearing a grey shirt, a black waistcoat with black robes embroidered with the Black crest on the breast. Harry grins and tugs at them.

"Did Kreacher get to you?"

“They were Dad’s,” Charlie says, stepping into the lift. “Kreacher made them for him for the Wizengamot.”

Another jerk to the stomach. Harry nods and awkwardly pats George’s shoulder.

“They look good,” he says quietly. George seems to sense something because he frowns at Harry.

“This is going to be fine,” he says. “Right Char?”

“Totally fine,” Charlie says easily as the doors close. He looks a lot more comfortable than George, much less starched. He’s wearing a soft cotton shirt and what looks like a soft pleated blue waistcoat and robes that wrap across his chest like a cloak, pinned with a broach that has a blue stone, like his heir ring. The robes are tartan with blue and yellow lines and the edges are fringed.

“Interesting robes,” Hermione raises her eyebrows.

“It’s not a robe,” Charlie says smiling. “It’s a *brata*, traditional Irish ceremonial robe of the *Tiarnas*. Any time the Heir or Lord sit at Wizengamot, we wear it. Mum had to really dig into the vault to find it, it hasn’t been in use in four generations.”

“It is quite something,” Daphne says quietly. “The resurrection of the Weasley seat. It was powerful in the 14th Century.”

“Yeah, well,” Charlie gives Harry the smallest of winks. “Exciting changes all round. I’m Charlie Weasley, by the way.”

He stretches his hand out to Daphne.

“Heir Greengrass,” Daphne says. George smiles at her. “I’m a friend of your brother.”

“Really?” Charlie raises his eyebrows, looking at the ridiculous, sappy grin on George’s face. “Poor you.”

Harry laughs as the doors open on level nine, but is silenced by the sight of the door to the Department of Mysteries. There are already other Heirs milling their way down the corridor to the door beside it and the steps further down to the courtroom. Harry realises that Lucius Malfoy is not trying to get him to remember the trial. He’s trying to get him to remember the night in the Ministry, drifting along in a haze completely under his potion and control. *Hold still, little serpent tongue*. Harry steps back into the lift. George notices, and steps back in, and so does Theo, just as the doors close. George pulls out his wand and waves it, pausing the lift.

“Harry?” Theo asks quietly. Harry leans against the back wall with his eyes closed. Inside his mind, he hears Severus’ voice: *breathe, farzandam*.

“I’m fine,” he says, realising that he is hissing. He reaches out and takes Theo’s hand so he can understand. “I’m fine.”

“One hundred,” Theo whispers. “Ninety- nine, ninety-eight -,”

Harry squeezes Theo’s hand as he counts.

“Take the time you need,” George says calmly, leaning against the doors. “It’s weird for me too. Being back here. With Dolohov and that. I saw that door and I just thought -,” George shakes his

head and smirks wryly down at his boots. “You know there was this moment where he went for Fred and I just lost it? I don’t even remember what I did or said -,”

“You screamed “fuck you, Dolohov,” Harry croaks. “And tried to drown him in two feet of pickled brain water.”

Theo snorts with laughter and George shakes his head again with a shy grin.

“It’s weird for me,” he repeats. “To be back here.”

“Me also,” Theo says softly. Harry knows he’s talking about Apollonius and the veil and watching Voldemort torture Harry. He’s not the only one who has bad memories in this place. Harry takes deep breaths of Theo’s magic, he tastes it on his tongue. *Mead. Honey. Plums.* It calms him. “But we are safe.”

“We are,” George affirms, eyes sharp. “We’re all together. Magnus will be outside the door and Fred is going to join him. You have more friends in that room than enemies.”

“Almost,” Theo corrects. “But the sentiment is important.”

Harry nods with each phrase and draws up the not-caring. *It doesn’t matter that I was taken. It doesn’t matter that Bellatrix tore me apart. It doesn’t matter that Sirius died in a room down the hall.* He feels calm and coldness trickle up his hand from his hidden Prince ring and opens his eyes. *Negahbane raaz. Guard the secrets.*

“You can do this,” Theo whispers. Harry nods. He can do this. *You are the Black Lord apparent and the youngest Anzar in centuries.* Harry knows it’s time to be him.

“Let’s go,” Harry says.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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The Dissident Heirs

Chapter by [elph13](#)

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags.

This time, Harry deals with the Minister for Magic.

Next time, Severus and Harry celebrate his sixteenth birthday.

For those of you playing Boy-who-Lived Bingo on discord - have fun! Can't wait to see how this chapter comes out. :)

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

I am Lord Black. I am the youngest Anzar in a century. I can do this.

The doors of the lift open again. Theo bends down to make a show of checking the buckles of his leather arm armour to create some distance between them as George and Harry step out. Quite a few heirs have loitered by the door to the Department of Mysteries, curious to see what they're up to, but Harry walks forward on shaking legs to join the others, strolling confidently down the corridor to the shining black door.

I am the Potter-Lord apparent. I have a Sire who can open up dimensions with one hand. I can do this.

Charlie and George keep up an easy patter with Hermione as Daphne and Theo naturally slip behind, making sure to leave an expected gap between them all, but Harry feels himself quietening the closer they get to the door. They swerve down the stairs but the thoughts continue. *Sirius died in there. I crossed the veil in there. If I crossed again, would I be able to see him, to hold him again?* The voices of the chattering heirs echo in the space. Harry breathes deeply.

I have a werewolf godfather-father. I have a snake who can poison people. I can do this.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harry is confronted with the sight of Draco Malfoy and could groan. What's worse, Harry can taste the compulsion again. Florals, heavy and perfumed on his tongue and absolutely disgusting to taste. Severus said it would get better over time but this doesn't feel better.

"Potter," Malfoy says quietly. Harry knows he has to do this, Malfoy is under his Sanctuary and the Black magic is tingling up his wrist to ensure it, so he pauses and holds onto George's sleeve to stop him moving ahead with Charlie and Hermione. At least with George nearby, he can breathe in his fennel scented magic and try and get rid of the taste and smell of pot-pourri.

“Malfoy,” he says. Malfoy steps aside, away from the flow of traffic down the stairs. He is wearing an almost floor length black waistcoat with silver brocade all over it under typical Malfoy green and black robes. Apart from a slight blueish shadowing under his eyes, he looks flawless and Harry finds it very fucking irritating. When George follows, Malfoy’s face turns to a sneer.

“Are you lost, Weasley?”

“Malfoy, meet George Weasley, Heir to the House of Black,” Harry says, deciding not to mention that George is sort of sharing the Heirship with a house elf and said house elf is the one that chose the heir to begin with.

“Heir Black?” Malfoy’s blue eyes glitter furiously. As his magic swells, so does the taste of the compulsion. Harry swallows hard and has to look away from him to stop feeling like he’s about to throw up. He has never regretted any spell he has cast quite like this one. *This is the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever done and that’s saying something.*

“Yes,” Harry says quietly. “Problem?”

“*Toujours Pur*,” Malfoy glares at George filthily. “Hundreds of years of legacy come to this and now a *Weasley* is the future of the House of black. It’s shameful.”

“Yeah?” George looks Malfoy up and down. “I could say the same thing about the future of the House of Malfoy, ferret-face.”

Harry imagines what the Black Prince would make of George compared to what he’d make of Malfoy, and swears that he can hear a dry chuckle inside his mind. Malfoy grits his teeth and glares at Harry.

“We need to speak,” he snaps.

“About what, Malfoy?” Harry sighs. He desperately wants to stop looking at him, do anything to stop tasting the compulsion on his tongue.

“Do not expose me,” Malfoy whispers furiously. “I have alliances to maintain, my father -,”

“Lord Black has no interest in exposing you since your Sanctuary is designed to protect you,” George says, cutting Malfoy off. Magnus gave George a run down on the situation with Draco, obviously the edited version. To everyone who wasn’t there or isn’t Theo, Harry enacted a perfectly normal Sanctuary clause. “Just remember the conditions of your safety.”

“I did not ask for it!” Malfoy spits, turning on his heel and stalking away. Harry is relieved and takes a deep breath of aniseed-scented air.

“Is he going to be a problem?” George asks quietly as they slowly follow Malfoy’s steps.

“If he is, he’s my problem now,” Harry rubs his forehead.

“Our problem,” George says firmly and Harry’s grateful. “What does he mean, he didn’t ask for it? Sanctuary has to be asked for.”

Fuck. Clearly, no amount of scheming with Magnus can make up for Malfoy being a shit liar.

“Uh ... would you believe me if I told you I was super powerful and just kind of decided I wanted to do it and did it?” Harry says, trying out the lie they used on Voldemort. He has a feeling though that George is actually more on the ball than a maniacal dictator who fucks Bellatrix Lestrange.

“No, but if that’s the lie we’re going with then yes, sure, of course, I believe you,” George says, with a quirk of his lips.

“Then that’s the lie we’re going with,” Harry mutters. “But to everyone else, he chose it, right?”

“Would be good to remind him of that,” George glares at Malfoy’s blonde head. “I’ll send a letter.”

“Get Magus to do it,” Harry says. “He’s scared of Magnus.”

“Not as scared as he will be of me,” George says under his breath and Harry smirks. He reckons Kreacher had more in mind than just sweetie-scented magic when he picked George Weasley for the future of the House of Black.

Together as Lord and Heir, they step inside the courtroom. It looks very different from the last time Harry was in it, the faces of children and young people filling the seats, but the effect is still the same. Everyone looks up at him as soon as he enters and Harry feels an unpleasant lurch. *I can do this. I can do this.* He smiles tightly at those he knows, Bones waves at him from the second to back row and Harry waves to Abbot, sitting on the front row. Quite a few people are staring at George’s robes.

“Bloody hell, Weasley,” says a girl who Harry recognises as a 7th-year Ravenclaw. “Coming up in the world aren’t you?”

“Heir Black now, Heir Wildsmith,” George says easily, turning his head so only Harry can hear him. “Belinda Wildsmith. Could be a no wands or a bear wands treaty for us depending on how we do today.”

“Where do we sit?” Harry asks George, wanting to get out of the eye line of all these people.

“The oldest houses sit at the back,” Charlie says, answering Harry’s question from the foot of the stairs where he and Hermione are waiting for them. Theo and Daphne have already taken seats, Daphne on one of the middle rows and Theo towards the back. “Black will be up there.”

Charlie gestures to the seats and Harry sees names engraved on certain points on the benches. *The House of Abbot. The House of Travers. The House of Mulciber.* Harry tries not to hold the gaze of the dark-skinned, sharp-eyed young man in his early twenties sitting in that seat.

I killed your Dad. I’m sorry.

“It’s not his son,” George says quietly. “A second cousin. Apollo Mulciber. He’s French. I don’t think they even knew one another.”

Harry nods and he and George climb the stairs to the very back bench. He stares at the names on the bench. *The House of Black. The House of Peverell. The House of Slytherin. The House of Ollivander.* He remembers the name at the start of the Potter Grimoire. *Hadrian Peverell.* He thinks of Death inside his not-dream-dreams, of her words from the tasteless place. *The names.* There is a woman in her twenties sitting in the Ollivander seat, who eyes Harry curiously.

“You are heir to what?” She asks curtly. *Maybe all three*, Harry thinks distantly but taps the gold plaque that says House of Black and sits down next to George. Hermione is on the next row down, right in front of them, with Theo further along and to right the right near Susan Bones. Hermione is staring at some of the names beside her.

“Who do you have?” Harry asks quietly, leaning forward.

“Gaunt,” she whispers back.

“That’s Tom’s heir’s seat,” Harry murmurs. “He’s Lord Gaunt. Who else?”

“Dumbledore and ... Grindlewald.”

“Really?” Harry says. “I didn’t know he was British.”

“His mother was. Hello, Harry.” He smells cold water and smiles up at Luna, who is sliding into the row below Hermione.

“Hey Luna,” he says. He nods to Padma Patil who is sitting down next to her, who nods back curiously. “Do you have anyone good?”

“Hmm,” Luna looks at the empty spaces next to her. “Prewett and ... Crouch.”

Harry remembers Barty Crouch’s death and winces. Next to him, George stiffens.

“Your uncles?” Harry whispers. George nods.

“Gideon named Fabian an Heir and then they were both killed, and Granda was killed the day after,” George swallows hard and stares at the empty space beside Luna. “They didn’t have time to name heirs again and then the magic had no one to claim it ...”

Harry remembers how urgently he had named Hermione as Heir to the House of Potter. He knows instinctively, somehow, that magic has to have somewhere to go.

If it has no wixen to guide, then it returns to where it is from, Sahara whispers into his mind.

So they don’t claim it, it claims them? Harry thinks back.

Magic chooses, Greenheart.

This reminds Harry of someone else, speaking from long ago. *The wand chooses the wizard*. He turns and looks at the Ollivander heir. She catches his eye warily.

“Hi,” Harry sticks out his hand. “I’m Harry Potter-Black. Most people just call me Potter.”

“Yes, hello, I am Marina Ollivander,” she smiles wryly. “You are the Black Lord apparent, I am surprised most people do not call you Lord Black.”

“Old habits, I guess, I’m still in school,” Harry shrugs. “Can I ask you something, Marina?”

“I have no interest in an association with the House of Black,” Marina looks mildly distasteful. “I have no interest in *that* magic.”

“No, I wasn’t - hey,” Harry frowns. “They’re misunderstood, okay? People make assumptions about them but it’s not their fault they’ve had some crazies -,”

“I don’t think I misunderstand the legacy of the children of the House of Black,” Marina says stiffly.

“Not them, the magic,” Harry says hotly. “The Black magic isn’t evil it’s just grumpy sometimes.”

Marina stares at him.

“You ... are talking of the magic?” She looks at him steadily for a moment as Harry nods stiffly. Marina raises her eyebrows slowly and then nods back. “What question did you have for me, Harry Potter-Black?”

“Oh, right, yeah,” Harry frowns. “What does ‘the wand chooses the wizard’ mean? Is it, like, that wands have their own magic that chooses or is it, like, heir magic or the wixen’s magic reacting to something in the wand and choosing the wand? I know magic chooses but *which* magic chooses?”

Marina stares at him.

“You speak of Magic as sentient,” she says quietly.

“Oh,” Harry winces, knowing that this is something that people find weird. “Um, yeah, it’s just a figure of speech.”

“No, it’s not,” Marina stares at Harry’s Black ring. “Tell me, Harry Potter-Black, does your wand suit you now you are so changed?”

Harry takes a sharp breath in. *Expect to be changed, Master.*

“What - what do you mean?” Harry asks. Marina smiles.

“If the Ollivanders have a gift aside from the building of conduits, it is that we see the truth of the conduits we have made,” she looks at the wand in Harry’s holster. “Let me see it.”

Harry hesitates but then slowly ejects the holly wand, holding it out to Marina, but she shakes her head.

“In your hand please,” she says. Harry holds it in his right hand, embarrassed by the persistent light shake that still happens, despite all his physical therapy.

“I was tortured,” he mutters quietly. “And I sort of died a bit, a year ago, got paralysed for a while -,”

“Harry,” George elbows him and speaks quietly. “Remember the thing about not talking to strangers?”

“Oh, right,” Harry winces at his lack of tact. He’s not meant to mention his health problems to anyone. Severus is worried what might make its way back to Tom. Marina looks at him curiously. “I just mean ... That’s why ... with the shaking. Better than the left though, I still can’t grip well on the left. Except for weapons.”

“A wand is a weapon,” Marina says quietly. “Can you grip your wand?”

“No,” Harry shakes his head. “I have a rune but it’s for axes and knives and shit.”

“Show me.”

Harry passes it to his left hand. The Anzar rune does not activate. His hand trembles to hold the loose grip.

“Enough,” Marina helps him move his wand back into his right hand. Her hands are dry and chapped. He sees callouses on the fingertips that remind him of Quidditch. It seems like wand building might be quite taxing. “Tell me truthfully then. Does it suit you?”

Harry looks down at it.

“No,” he whispers. “It’s ... it’s ... I still *like* it, but it just feels like ...”

“A piece of wood,” Marina nods.

“Yes!” Harry whispers. “I ... I tried just, y’know, chatting to it but it’s quiet, you know? It doesn’t fizz or tingle like it used to.”

Or like Fred and George’s wands did in Privet Drive, when it felt like they were objecting to being touched by me.

Marina looks at him for a long second.

“I think, Mr Potter, it would be better you tell no others that you speak to conduits,” she says quietly.

“Oh,” Harry swallows. *Right, that’s probably a weird Mage thing.* “I just meant, like, in my head, not ... not really. Obviously not. That would be weird.”

“I don’t believe you,” Marina runs a finger along the wand. “But I shall not expose you.”

Harry doesn’t know what to say so he nods curtly.

“You find the answer to your question within yourself,” Marina says, rubbing a finger against a knot in the body of the wand. “Wixen need wands for conduits, the magical elements of them guide the magic inside the wixen, that of their own being and of the magics they have inherited or carry. So yes, the magic inside the wixen chooses, but so does the magic inside the conduit. It is a ... marriage, of sorts.” Marina looks at Harry’s Black ring. “But you have no need of a conduit any longer. Not truly. Your wand knows it and so, no doubt, does your magic. It is no longer a marriage of equality and when that happens, either the wixen or the wand steps back.”

“Can I ... can I still use it?” Harry asks, looking at his wand a little fearfully. He remembers the Priori Incantatem in the graveyard. It was pretty useful for that.

“You can,” Marina says. “You, I believe, could tame any wand to your service but there is only one that is your equal partner.”

“So ...,” Harry stares at her. “Do I need a new wand?”

“No,” Marina’s voice is suddenly as distant and vague as Ollivander’s himself. “The wand that suits you will find you. I’m sure of it.”

It seems to be the end of the conversation. All this talk of wands and marriages is very fucking weird but he supposes maybe it's genetic. So Harry sits back, frowning. Inside his head, he seeks out Sahara's voice.

Do you know where my wand is? The one that suits me?

Snakes do not need wands.

Well, thanks. So helpful.

Trust the conduit maker, Greenheart. Your wand is coming.

As the room fills, Harry realises how many empty spaces there are. He leans close to George who has been quietly chatting to Hermione.

"There are loads of empty spaces," he whispers. George nods.

"There are fifty-three seats and fifteen of them are without heirs," George murmurs back. "Most of those are seats held in proxy by Death Eaters."

People, Harry realises, who have spent fifteen years in Azkaban. Who have not raised or named Heirs. Who now can only partake in the process by using stewards and proxies for votes since they cannot sit in the chambers. He looks down at the plaque next to them. *House of Slytherin*. He traces it with a finger and misses, brutally, the sparkling joy of the Slytherin magic.

Come back to me, Harry finds himself thinking. *Please. Come back to me, somehow.*

"Welcome, esteemed Heirs of the Wizengamot!"

Harry tries not to flinch as he hears the voice of Lucius Malfoy. It does something to his body, an immediate tightness that he can't shake. *I am not in a cage. I can do this*. He takes a deep breath and raises his head to look at the man he hates. Immediately, he feels a surge of absolute vindictive pleasure.

Sirius, you motherfucking wonder.

Lucius Malfoy is scarred. His skin twisted across his cheek and eye, pink and livid, in a sickly zig-zag that Harry thinks, with a jolt, almost looks like an S, carved by the claw of the Grim. Harry hopes that Severus is taking his sweet time in healing them. Malfoy's eyes flicker over him and then away as if he is noting where Harry is.

"Lords Apparent," he says in a smooth voice, waving his wand in a long motion and several chairs appear at the front, facing the seats of the Wizengamot. "Please join us."

"Fucking wanker," Harry mutters, his stomach churning at the notion of being close to Lucius Malfoy again, but he rises. Around the room, only a few other people stand. He and Theo have the longest walk and they inadvertently fall into step beside one another. Theo's robes brush against his. This close, his thoughts flutter through the bond to Harry and he hears them with every step they take, like a comforting rhythm: *He cannot hurt you here, he cannot take you again*. In a semi-circle facing the other heirs are six chairs. Two are already filled by the second cousin of Mulciber and Bulstrode and there is a boy Harry recognises as being a Beauxbatons student from fourth year who hears announce himself as Torquil Travers at the bottom of the stairs. *Bill killed Travers in the*

Department of Mysteries. Harry sees Neville take his place, looking uncomfortable but very grown up in violet robes and then Harry and Theo separate at the bottom of the chamber, facing one of Lucius Malfoy's assistants. She's a taut-faced young woman in her twenties and Harry knows, just from looking, that she's here to make things difficult.

"You are?" She demands of Theo.

"Theodore Asger Nott, Nott Lord Apparent," Theo says.

There is a swift echo of mutterings around the chamber. Harry realises that unlike Sirius' death, which Lucius Malfoy has been enjoying taking credit for in the papers as the legal capture and execution of a criminal, not many people know that Apollonius is dead. Theo marches past her and takes his seat.

"Your name?" Her eyes sparkle viciously as she stares at Harry's scar. Harry can feel people smirking on all sides. He sighs inwardly.

"Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black," Harry says, adding *Slytherin-Prince* in his own mind for good measure. "Black Lord Apparent and Potter Lord Apparent."

"Ring?" She demands. The other Lords-Apparent frown and shift, except Theo who is as still as a statue, staring at the woman with an expression of complete disinterest which Harry knows means he is thinking of all the different ways he could conceivably kill her.

"You didn't ask for anyone else's ring," Harry says.

"Not everyone else claims to be twice-named Lord and is of ... questionable stock," she says.

"Questionable stock?" Neville repeats with a frown. Nearby, Harry can see Lucius Malfoy smirking. He knows what's happening. It's either just a fun humiliation power-play for Malfoy to enjoy or, possibly, for Tom to enjoy later via a Pensieve. *Fuck you, Tom*. Harry sighs heavily and holds out his hand with his Black diamond on.

"That is not a ring, that is a deformity," the assistant says. Harry hears laughter in the chamber but doesn't move. "Where is the other?"

"Ask Gringotts," Harry says curtly.

"It is not enough to pass," the assistant shakes her head. "If you cannot prove genuine lineage, then you must leave."

"Genuine lineage?" Harry snorts and notices Tremblay who is smirking with laughter and remembers Fitz's ferocity that his half-brother was just as much a bastard as him. "That's a fucking joke."

"Mr Black, please leave," the assistant says. Harry looks at Malfoy, whose grey eyes are as cold as flint. He knows he has two choices. He can give the show that Tom wants, probably some sneaky way for Tom to get another look at his power, and stay in the room or he can go. If he goes, Lucius Malfoy will have free reign. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the terrified face of Beatrice Selwyn, a second-year Hufflepuff who has a Death Eater father and has signed a no wands treaty with Harry. *Well, a show it is then*.

“Fine,” Harry breathes out heavily and turns around. “Heir Potter, can I borrow you for a moment?”

Hermione walks down towards him, whispers abounding around the chamber.

“He made her his *heir!*”

“I thought they were boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“She’s a muggleborn! There’s *never* been a muggleborn Potter heir!”

Hermione walks incredibly gracefully, shooting a dirty look at Pansy Parkinson on her way down, but her jaw is tight as she reaches the step. Harry takes her hand and shows it to the assistant.

“Is that a Potter ring?” He says. The assistant looks at it, looks Hermione up and down, and sniffs.

“Yes,” she mutters.

“Right, goodo,” Harry says, slipping into a Mr Weasley phrase. Over Hermione’s shoulder, he sees Charlie smirking fondly. “Call the magic for me, Mi.”

“What?” Hermione’s eyes widen and Harry steps a little closer, holding her hand and feeding parseltongue through her ring so that the assistant takes a rapid step back.

“Just like we always do, okay? Think of the things, just think of them and I can ask it to come.”

Hermione nods and closes her eyes, taking a deep breath. Harry stares at the Potter stone, thinks of his Mother’s voice, of Hermione’s scent, of the fact that he knows now, thanks to Severus, he has Lily Potter’s ears. Then, when he can taste tea on his tongue and smell coal fires, he speaks inside his mind:

Your Lord and Heir need you. I know I don’t have the ring but please, be cooperative.

Hermione is whispering under her breath, rapid words that no one else can hear: “you are so loved, you are so loved, you are so loved.” Harry sees the red glow building in the ring and feels the tea scent growing stronger around him until he reaches out and touches the red ruby and can feel the warmth of the glow in his fingers, a flicker of gold in his nails meeting warm fire concealed in stone. Far above, he can feel Marina Ollivander watching him closely.

“Come to us,” Harry whispers.

The Griffin of fire erupts from Hermione’s ring, staring around the room with flaming eagle eyes.

“Merlin, not this fucking bird again!” Parkinson shrieks from the second row.

“Cool, Harry!” Nigel Wolpert, a second-year Gryffindor, leans forward with eyes as round as saucers.

“Now is not the time for parlour tricks,” a dark-haired man in his twenties snaps. “Get on with it, boy!”

“Heir Burke,” Hermione whispers. *Of Borgin and Burkes*, Harry thinks, undoubtedly one of Tom’s. He ignores Burke and stares up at the Griffin.

“Sorry to bother you,” he says cordially. “They want proof that I am the Potter Lord Apparent.”

Since you’re hiding the ring from me, Harry adds inside his head, and the Griffin ruffles its feathers as it has heard his words and has no idea what Harry is talking about. Harry rolls his eyes.

Come on, he looks into its stern, fiery gaze. *Since you’re being so damn elusive, help me out a bit.*

The Griffin lets out a great caw and flies into the air, settling itself in front of Harry, claws made of fire singeing the marble beneath their feet. Then it bows. Harry bows back.

Thank you, he glares at it. *Can I have my Potter ring back now?*

The griffin caws and shakes its flaming feathers, tossing sparks into the air.

I take it that’s a no, Harry thinks drily. The bird gives him an oddly coy, playful look and Harry can’t help but smirk at it. It might be annoying and hiding from him right now, but there’s something very funny about the Potter magic. He thinks of James’ letter: *it’s a finicky beast.*

“Woah!” Nigel exclaims, standing up to lean over the bannister towards the Griffin. “Can I touch it, Harry?”

“Best not,” Harry grins at Nigel. He sees that Draco Malfoy, sitting three rows back, looks furious.

“Well, that’s that. No one can deny that is the Potter magic.” Marina says from the back row. “Can we kindly get on?”

“Agreed,” A young woman in her early thirties adds, looking at her watch. “I need to be back at the DMLE in thirty minutes.”

“Excuse me, Heir Marchbanks, but the Lord Potter apparent has not proven his claim to the House of Black,” the assistant snaps.

“Christ on a broom,” Harry mutters and, in a fit of frustration, abruptly pulls up the Black Magic, so ready at his fingertips and chilling down his wrist, desperate to prove itself like the Potter magic. It’s the fastest he thinks he’s ever done it, and the only word in his head is: *reveal*. In hindsight, he thinks that might have been a bad plan, because, for an inexplicable second, he is sure that there is a white raven, huge and violent, bursting from his chest and flying directly towards the assistant before it vanishes in a flash of blinding white light. Nearly everyone in the room yells or screams or cheers. Harry blinks and looks around, but everything seems normal apart from the assistant, however, who is quaking.

“That was a sufficient demonstration of the Black magic,” Marina calls. “Are we done with these ridiculous games? Some of us are not children on their holidays, we have work to get to.”

“Hear, hear,” Marcus Flint says. “Get on with it, Potter.”

Harry hasn’t missed having that face around Hogwarts and scowls at him.

“So are we done?” Harry asks the assistant.

The assistant nods. With trembling legs, she steps aside. Harry sits at the end of the row of chairs, next to Theo. He can feel the bond thrumming gently and smell hints of rain. Theo always likes it when Harry acts like a Slytherin twat in public. He tries not to smile and it’s suddenly easy not to

do because Lucius Malfoy is walking around to stand beside him. Harry has not missed the smell of his magic. It's floral, like Draco's, but much more overpowering. Cloying and choking and for a second, he is in Grimmauld Place, watching Arthur die. *I'm sorry, Harry.* For a moment, Harry is lost in the sorrow that some of Arthur's last words were apologies. *I should have apologised, God, fucking hell, why didn't I apologise?* Then Harry smells a vibrant freshness, a thunderstorm breaking and realises Theo must be noticing his panic. He takes a slow breath and imagines Severus' voice in his head. *Breathe, farzandam.*

"Honoured Heirs of the Wizengamot," Lucius Malfoy begins. "You are our future. I call you here today, to ask a question: what do you want your future to be?"

"Jesus fucking Christ," Harry mutters, thinking Lucius Malfoy is starting to sound a lot like Tony Blair. He catches Hermione's eye and she smirks. He knows she's thinking the same thing.

"That's why we were called?" Marina frowns from the back. "There isn't an emergency?"

"It is an emergency of culture, of our society, of ensuring the survival of how we live," Lucius Malfoy says easily. "You are called, Heirs, to secure the future."

"Ridiculous," Heir Marchbanks folds her arms. "I have a stack of work on my desk, Minister!"

"We shall have order in the chambers!" the assistant shouts, and Harry thinks she might be taking on the role of some kind of mini Umbridge to Lucius' Fudge. *At least she doesn't have a bow.*

"That is incorrect," Daphne calls, her level voice travelling. "According to the outlines created by the Wizard's Council in the 15th Century, the Wizengamot is a place of free speech and the Head of the Wizengamot provides session guidance but not a repudiation of expression."

"So we can say what we like!" Ernie Macmillan yells. "And I say this is uncalled for and my father shall find it most impudent that we have been called to speak of future governance before we take seats!"

"Seats might find us all quicker than we want them to," Mulciber says sharply, his dark eyes flashing. "So it might behove you to listen to the Minister."

"The Mulciber Lord Apparent is quite right," Lucius Malfoy inclines his head to the boy, and Harry just knows that Tom already has him, or is on his way to having him. "As Minister, it is my only hope to ensure the future. Change comes to us from unexpected avenues, unexpected places and people. There was a young man who once sat in this chamber, Lord Gaunt."

There is a collected intake of breath. Harry clenches his fist and stares at the stones underneath his feet. It sounds like the start of a fairy story - *there was once a young boy called Lord Gaunt ... who grew up to become a psychopath and killed my Mum and James Potter and Cedric Diggory.*

"He desired a future and he built it. Created a world anew with aspiration and inspiration the likes of which the world has ever known," Lucius Malfoy goes on. "He was unstoppable."

"Was he?" Harry says quietly, brushing his fringe back to show his scar. It's enough. He sees a series of smirks ripple around the room.

"Some young Heirs follow blindly in the footsteps of their predecessors," Lucius Malfoy carries on, settling his eyes on Harry. "Some young Heirs cannot see where the path ahead of them may

lead to ruin. Yet others choose paths that are fiercer and bolder than the Lords before them. There is a war going on, honoured Heirs. A war against our culture, a rise of muggle influences -," Malfoy pauses and stares directly at Hermione. Harry's so proud when he sees her glaring directly back, unblinking, the Potter ring glowing red on her hand. "- of creature invasions, of the liquidation of the pureblood agenda so that we become nothing so that we are nothing. When the muggles come with their weapons and torches -,"

"Torches?" Harry scoffs. "Do you even know what weapons muggles use?"

"-what will be left of us?" Lucius Malfoy carries on as if Harry has not spoken. "What will be left of that which was called Wixen? There is a person, a powerful person, who has been misrepresented to you in a thousand different ways. He desires to honour you and your future. To work with you."

"To torture you, use you and murder you," Harry adds under his breath. Neville catches it, and shoots Harry a fierce, protective look.

"As the Minister for Magic, I must seek a peaceful route out of any internal Wixen conflict, the last thing I desire for our nation is to descend into civil war as it has done under previous administrations. Why would I take a course of action that leads to wixen killing wixen, when all I want is to ensure our survival? Why would I lead you down a road that only brings up more heirs to Lords Apparent before their time?"

Lucius Malfoy gestures to the row of Lord's Apparent. Harry glares at him. *You're the reason I'm the Black Lord apparent, you fucking bellend, and your Master's the reason I'm the Potter one.*

"Look at them. Four out of six have had to claim their Lordships too soon, fathers stolen away in the grip of war this very summer, one family -," his eyes fixing maliciously on Harry as he gestures vaguely towards him, "-against others."

Lucius Malfoy lets his hand drift down towards the other Lords apparent. Now Harry knows the point of this show. *So it's me against them. It's my fault their fathers and Lords are dead.*

"What do you want your future to be, Heirs of the Wizengamot?" Lucius Malfoy whispers. "Will you trust me and work with me and help me ensure a brighter future for us all? Or will you follow the path to ruin?"

As Lucius Malfoy finishes his sentence, he is standing directly behind Harry, his hands on the back of Harry's chair. Harry knows what this gesture means. Lucius Malfoy might as well be holding a handwritten sign over his head with an arrow pointing down: Harry is the path to ruin. Harry doesn't move. Nobody does. He imagines that he's not a very good alternative to a brighter future, the boy literally scarred and maimed by Voldemort. He tries to tell himself all the things he is and has, how he can do this, but he doesn't believe it. Tom's voice flits through Harry's mind. *You are broken, you pathetic thing.* Harry doesn't expect anyone to speak for him. Why would they? Then he hears a scrape of a chair and turns. Neville is standing up and glaring at Lucius Malfoy.

"The House of Longbottom will never stand with Lord Gaunt," Neville spits out the words, his voice shaking but clear. "If your request is that I will follow you and your *Lord*, Minister, I will not. The House of Longbottom bows to no one, least of all Lord Vol- Vol - Lord *Gaunt*, a maniac who was bested by a *baby*."

Nobody laughs. Harry looks around the room and sees sneers and fears and insecurity. Neville has always had the courage to stand up to people but not everyone is built that way. There's something in the way that Neville's standing, alone, facing them all, knees trembling but jaw firm, that wakes Harry up. He can smell waves of Neville's magic, bright and herbal, the taste of bay leaves on his tongue. He won't let Neville stand alone. Harry rises to his feet, deliberately kicking his chair back hard so Lucius Malfoy buckles a little. *Take that, you dark Lord cocksucker.*

"The House of Potter stands as a House in Arms with the House of Longbottom," Harry takes a deep breath. He wants to show power, but also to protect those who are afraid to show their colours. He doesn't know how to do any of it. *Jesus, I'm so fucking bad at all this shit.* "The House of Potter and the House of Black are at ... well, I guess we're at war with Lord Gaunt? Or well, I guess he's kind of at war with me -,"

"He is!" George shouts down. "As of 24th of June, 1995!"

When he took me and my blood and my boyfriend and remade himself, Harry thinks bitterly.

"Thanks, Heir Black," Harry gives him a thumbs up. "And, now I'm like, a Lord or whatever I'm at war with him too, I reckon."

"Eloquent," he hears someone mutter and flushes bright red. *Why can't it be literally anyone but me?* Harry takes another deep breath and tries to think of something that's clear and concise and easy. There's nothing. It's like the moment when he first laid eyes on the dragon and every spell he'd ever learned fell out of his head.

He has nothing.

Then Theo's words float towards him through the stretching web of the bond, just near enough for Harry to catch. Theo must be thinking something really fucking hard, but Harry catches the whisper of it:

If you cannot tell them who you are, show them.

Harry's a lot of different things now. He's lost the Slytherin magic and the Potter ring, but he's gained a lot too. He's a Mage. He's a Creature. He's survived. Harry closes his eyes and reaches for the Black Magic. He thinks about his intention and gives himself a millisecond of thought to consider what he wants to show. Only one thing comes to mind and the Black magic is teeming with it, coiling inside itself, eager and waiting. *Power.* There is a roaring surge of delight inside him and in his mind's eye, he sees the dark, glittering eyes of the Black Prince.

Oh, we have such power to show.

The lights in the chamber blow out. People scream. Harry feels a rush of voices echoing up through him and opens his eyes. He stares at faces that stare back at him, their wide eyes reflecting light back to him and knows that he must be glowing with it like a single candle in the darkness. He looks over his shoulder and feels, suddenly wings brushing against them. Raven wings. *What the fuck?* Harry catches Hermione's eye and tries to show with his eyes that he has no idea what he's doing but Hermione has her hand clapped over her mouth and is staring at him in amazement. He really hopes that he looks cool, and not like some big fucking crazy angel man. *Still, if I could fly again this way, that would be really fucking awesome!* Either way, he knows it's time to push on. Harry swallows hard and begins.

“I am the Lord Black Apparent. We are the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black and we are at war with Tom Marvolo Riddle, called Lord Gaunt, called Lord Voldemort -,”

“Called Snakeface!” A voice that sounds like George yells from the back. Oddly, it helps. Harry smirks.

“ - He’s powerful, but he’s not the only one with power. I have power. My House has power. We, us, gathered here together, we have power too. We’ve been brought here today because the Minister knows we are powerful together.” Harry looks at their faces and knows that it’s time. Lucius Malfoy has done his performance, now Harry has to do his. “If you will bear arms with me, bear them.”

Wands lift around the chamber. Neville, George, Charlie, Hermione, Ernie, Hannah, Susan and little Nigel Wolpert and Eustace Fawley all put their wands in the air. He feels the glow around him diminishing and the lights around the chambers relighting slowly.

“Thank you,” Harry nods to them, especially focusing on Wolpert and Fawley, the youngest of them, who both look determined but scared. He looks over the rest of the Heirs who sit in the semi-darkness. “I bear no ill will to those who do not bear arms for me if you will not bear arms against me and mine. If you wish, you may declare it.”

He hopes that it’s enough so that those with no wands treaties who need to maintain a cover can maintain it. Daphne is the first to stand up. There is a ripple of interest around the room and for the first time, Harry appreciates just how important and powerful Lord Greengrass must be.

“I will not bear wands against the House of Potter,” Daphne says calmly. “I will not join a war waged against a sixteen-year-old. I believe in the democracy of this chamber and the sanctity of our government. I believe in the power I hold in my house and the power Lord Potter -Black apparent holds in his. I will honour my no-wands treaty with the House of Potter.”

There is silence in the wake of Daphne’s words. It is one thing for her to take a stand on his behalf, her father is powerful on his own. From everything Theo’s told Harry about him, Lord Greengrass basically manages all the international trade with the Congregation. Not everyone who has taken a no-wands treaty with Harry has that kind of protection. Harry stares out at them all in the semi-darkness of the half-light of the torches, still struggling to come back to life, listening to the silence and trying to calm himself down. *It’s not their fault, they need protection, not exposure, Blaise warned me* - Then Shafiq, Smith, and a second year Hufflepuff, Camilla Wenlock, stand up. Harry’s heart soars. He sees Draco Malfoy stare, open-mouthed and Marcus Flint shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Magnus has told him that Shafiq is another strong neutral house and so is Wenlock. Smith is thought to be a light seat and expected to align with Harry anyway, which Harry finds privately hilarious given how much Smith hates his living guts. Tremblay looks furious at the lot of them, the red scar on his neck from Harry’s axe still visible, so that’s a real bonus. He can only imagine what Lucius Malfoy’s face is like behind him.

“I will honour my no wands treaty with the House of Black,” Shafiq says calmly. Harry nods at her, remembering how fierce she had seemed when she asked to court him on the Express last year.

“Me too,” Camilla pipes up, giving Harry a small smile.

“As will I,” Smith mutters and Harry tries not to scowl at him or look anywhere else with any kind of expectation. *It is enough, it has to be enough.* Harry knows that these are the people with no wands treaties who have nothing to lose in announcing their position here. It’s the Slytherin heirs,

the children of Death Eaters and known dark seats, children who have approached Harry and Blaise in secret, wanting protection but also wanting it privately. Richmond, Goyle, Selwyn and Theo, are the ones in the most danger. Harry knows not to expect them to reveal their hidden hands. Then there is a movement to his left and Harry feels a surge through the bond. *Oh fuck.*

Theo has stood up.

— — —

Theo can feel Harry's panic, can feel his instinct to push Theo back into his seat which is a pressure made of pure magic against his body like Daphne's heir magic, but Theo ignores it. Even if it is making him want to glare at Harry firmly and tell him to stop because Theo decided this morning that he was going to do this and not even Harry will change his mind.

Sit down, Harry's voice chants in his mind. *Sit down, sit down sit down -*

Theo can't sit down. Theo just saw Harry wield the Black magic in a way he had never seen, with wings made of dark feathers of magic and crowned in snowy white light erupting from his shoulders so that he looked like fucking Hermes or a damned Valkyrie of legend, inconceivable and yet, blatantly, majestically, right in front of them all. After that, there is nothing on earth that will stop Theo from standing up beside Harry, even as his mind is still twisting through various very important questions: *Are the wings real? Could I touch them? Could he use them? Could I kiss him whilst he's wearing them? Would they be sensitive?* Apollonius told him to follow power. That is precisely what Theo is going to do.

"I am under the wardship of Lord Greengrass. I stand with Heir Greengrass and with the family Zabini, who are allied with the House of Potter and Black," Theo hesitates for a second, knowing the words on his lips will change his life completely, but his life has already been transformed. *Heart be the bolder.* "For these reasons, I stand with the House of Black."

There is a ripple around the room and Theo can see Flint and Tremblay and Parkinson and Draco all glaring at him. He doesn't care. He doesn't even care that Harry's frantic thoughts are pushing at him through the bond (*Please be safe, why can't you be safe? What's wrong with you?*) Theo knows that his voice matters here. He's the son of a known Death Eater, whilst his declaration is not as powerful as having a no wands treaty with Harry directly, it proves something. *Never forget who you have always been.* That's what Blaise said. Theo knows this is the moment he needs to stand in whatever little power he has. He may not be a voting Lord yet, but this is the first shot fired over the bow, his first signal to the Minister and the other Dark seats that he is not his father.

"Lord Nott Apparent," Minister Malfoy says quietly, fixing Theo with a piercing glare. "I would advise you to take your seat."

Theo knows the risks. He's the son of the oldest friend of the Dark Lord. He's expected to align himself with the Minister in every way, not with a neutral faction. Theo does not care. Theo looks steadily at the Minister and lets his voice carries all around the chamber:

"As you said, Minister, some heirs choose paths that are fiercer and bolder than the Lords before them."

There is silence. Theo will not look at Harry but he can feel the trembling pride flooding between them. They are close enough, so close that if one of them moves, then their robes will touch. It is enough to hear Harry's thoughts pulsing with worry and joy towards him: *I fucking love you, you stupid Slytherin, now sit the fuck down, Jesus Christ* -

Theo doesn't sit down. He remembers Apollonius' words from his younger days: *when making a stand, do not stand down until someone else rises*. Theo allows himself to meet the eyes of the other dissident heirs or others who might be swayed. *Rise. Rise, if you dare*. Malfoy is glaring at Theo with an oddly shrewd expression. Daphne catches his eyes with a faint smile and Theo sees the respect there. He can't help the swelling feeling of joy it creates in his chest. Then a small, trembling girl stands up on the same row as Lovegood.

"I honour my - my no wands treaty with the House of Potter and the House of Black," twelve-year-old Beatrice Selwyn squeaks out. She is the last person Theo expected to rise, being so small and young with such a powerful Death Eater father, but there she is, with more courage than anyone in the room. There is silence, a long, deafening second, and then an explosion of people standing on their feet.

"You're a SELWYN!" Tremblay yells at her and little Selwyn flinches.

"She's a fucking Hufflepuff!" someone else bellows. "Of course she's a traitor!"

"You leave her alone!" An even smaller girl yells. Theo recognises her as a first-year Hufflepuff called Tara Ogden. They are seated side by side on the third row up and Ogden grabs little Selwyn's hand. "She's amazing!"

"She won't be for much longer," Marcus Flint gives little Selwyn a dark look. "Her father will see to that."

"No he won't," Harry says fiercely, clenching and unclenching his left hand. The Black ring pulses with white light and suddenly George Weasley is beside Harry. Theo is not sure if he has apparated or Harry moved him with magic, but George Weasley's eyes are glinting with the Black magic the way that Fred Weasley's sometimes do. In a blink, he is casting a shield to protect Selwyn, who flinches but then stares in amazement at the bubble of light around her. The gathered Heirs fall quiet.

"The drawing of Wands is not traditionally permitted inside the chambers, Mr Weasley," Minister Malfoy draws. "Nor is apparition."

"We're not in chambers, this is just a bunch of mostly underage heirs you rustled up to indoctrinate," George says shortly, glaring back at him, "and I'm not Mr Weasley. I'm the Heir to the House of Black and a guardsman to the Lord Black apparent and if my Lord commands me to protect Heir Selwyn, then I'll do it."

Theo risks a glance at Harry. He would bet every penny in his vault that Harry wasn't aware he'd commanded George to do anything, but he looks more than happy with the outcome, eyes fixed on little Selwyn with a frown, as if determined to make sure she is okay. Lord Selwyn probably laughed as Harry was tortured in the graveyard and yet, typically, Harry does not seem to care a bit. Theo feels a rush of love for a boy who is so damned concerned about a little girl he barely knows, whose father is a Death Eater. *This is why he is different*, Theo thinks. *This is why this will work*.

“You’re a damned *Weasley!*” Draco bellows, standing up to glare at George, his pale face flushed pink. “You’re part of a defunct House! You’re just as useless as Lovegood and Ollivander who don’t even *use* their titles -,”

“Watch yourself, Heir Malfoy,” the Ollivander Heir, who Harry seems to have developed some kind of impromptu friendship with (because of course he has) stands up and glares down at him. “My great Uncle may not take part in lawmaking or bear the title *Lord* but he made the wands that do, including yours. Dragon heartstring, isn’t it?”

“And Daddy prefers to spend his money on what matters,” Lovegood says dreamily. “Like recording the life cycles of blubbering humdingers.”

Harry snorts softly beside him and Theo forces himself not to grin. On the other side of Harry, Longbottom bites his lip with laughter and shakes his head.

“The point is, no one cares what you do!” Draco snaps, face red. “You’re nothing! You’re irrelevant!” Draco points at George Weasley who is casually proving his own relevance by maintaining a flawless shield around Selwyn. “Your Lord doesn’t even *sit!*”

“Not true,” the second Weasley son says lightly. Charles Weasley is leaning casually back on his bench, sleeves rolled up to reveal his dragonfire burns, and with one dragon hide resting on the back of the bench in front of him, the owner of which is Heir Burke and looks very disgruntled to have a boot by his ear. In him, Theo recognises all the studied informality of Fred Weasley. “As of this morning we are no longer a defunct House, my eldest brother and *Tiarna* shall reclaim his seat and clan Weasley has been seated on the Wizengamot longer than the House of Malfoy so ...”

“So suck it, Malfoy,” George Weasley finishes, eyes glittering. Heirs around the room giggle and Theo risks a glance at Draco, who looks almost puce. Then he glances at Daphne who only rolls her eyes as if the whole thing is entirely too droll for words. Theo tries not to grin to himself. He feels something odd rising up inside him and realises he is actually having fun.

“We stand with the Clan Weasley,” Harry says quickly.

“Based on what?” A fifth-year Ravenclaw called Siobhan Brocklehurst says. Harry looks utterly stumped so Theo thinks thoughts fiercely through the bond to him: *family. Family bonds. House of Black.*

“Family bonds,” Harry says curtly, clearly trying not to look at Theo. “We’re related through the House of Black.”

“What?” Draco splutters at the implication he’s related to the Weasleys. *This really is fun.*

“Cedrella Black,” Lovegood calls down. “George’s grandmother.”

“Thanks, Luna,” George calls back. Brocklehurst settles back, looking satisfied. Harry doesn’t look at Theo but Theo feels two words pressed through the bond: *Thank you.* Theo tries not to smile, feeling a bold lightness around his heart. He realises he is comfortable here, in this majestic chamber of justice and law. He always envied his father’s seat in government and had always thought that the only good thing about being Lord Nott would be that it allowed him a front-row seat to the creation of history. Politics requires a sharp mind and a cunning intellect. Theo prides himself that he has them. Beside him, Harry looks already exhausted by the whole charade whereas

Theo feels as if he is just beginning. *This doesn't tire me. I can do this.* The realisation soars through Theo with delight: *this is part of who I am.*

"I have a question for the Black and Potter Lord apparent." Gemma Farley, who was a Slytherin prefect in Theo's first year, stands up. Her eyes settle on Harry with mild curiosity, eyes dancing between Theo standing on one side and Longbottom on the other. They make an unlikely pair, Theo imagines. One, a brother, a House in Arms with a lineage of light magic going back centuries. The other, nothing more than a seeming political acquaintance, a dark house turning towards the grey. *Yet it proves Harry's political diversity.* Theo straightens his back and stares calmly at Gemma Farley.

"Um, okay," Harry says, tearing his eyes away from Selwyn who seems to be settling comfortably inside George's shield, looking around at it with interest. Ogden is sitting behind her and prodding the shield with her finger, enjoying its bubbly surface.

"Do you intend to offer this kind of surety for all those who swear no wands treaties with you?" Farley asks quietly, gesturing to George's shield. The silence is thick. Theo can see the wisdom in the question and the cunning behind it. Theo can see that Harry is struggling to answer. He glances at George whose brows are furrowed and at Granger who is leaning forward with an anxious face. They don't know what to say. Theo does. This is how Slytherins speak to one another, after all, assessing gain and loss in everything from family bonds to study partners. Theo understands the meaning behind her words. Farley asks for surety but what she really wants is a demonstration of what kind of surety could be offered to her. She will not bear her wand or promise not to bear it on a Lord she cannot predict. *Proof of intention to protect.* Theo takes a deep breath and, despite the headache that's starting between his eyes with all of this mental communication (perhaps he can investigate the impact of such bond communication tonight in the Greengrass Library) thinks a few words to Harry.

If they're looking for a guardian, give them one.

Harry nods to himself and shoots his wand into its holster. When he lifts his wand, it is like the whole chamber takes a breath. Theo is not surprised. Heir magic is one thing, but most heirs don't know the truth about Harry. They think that, like them, his heir magic is limited. Wands, however, they believe to be limitless. *This is where the real show begins.*

"Expecto Patronum," Harry whispers. The quietness of his voice adds to the impressiveness of the magic, which is a roar of light and colour, bursting from his wand tip like a blinding fountain. Prongs leaps onto the floor. There are gasps and intakes of breath, but no exclamations of incredulity, instead, a hushed reverence. Theo's heart sings. *This is when things could change. This is when they start to believe in him.*

Mulciber, Theo sees, is leaning forward and staring at Prongs with an intense look of curiosity. *They'll have told him Prongs killed Lord Mulciber.* Prongs tosses his antlers, Theo notices the way his eyes sweep the room and Theo knows he is looking for him. Theo's stomach swoops with worry and he finds himself desperately thinking: *no, don't come here, don't give me away* - and is relieved Prongs merely snorts and walks over to stand in front of Beatrice, who stares down at him with a dazzling smile. Harry lowers his wand. Prongs stays. Theo could smirk with pride. *He's learning how to give a proper show.* That's when the muttering begins around the chamber, but Gemma Farley's eyes have not left Harry's face. He turns back to look at her.

"Yes," he says simply. "Where I can, I intend to."

“Intend,” Burke sneers. “Intentions mean nothing.”

Theo wonders how many times Burke has sold an item from his father’s store with strict instructions to mind intentions around them lest the purchaser is wrapped up in a curse. *Hypocrite*.

“All that’s being spoken of here today are intentions,” Granger’s voice echoes around the chamber. She looked a little flustered (after all, she was as surprised by Harry's extraordinary display of the Black magic as Theo was - the fucking wings!) but her eyes are sharp. “Lord Gaunt has made no promises, has he? He’s sworn no vows to protect anyone here.”

“He’s promised to fucking off the likes of you,” Flint mutters. Theo almost smirks at Flint’s stupidity. He never was the brightest candle in the bunch, but this seems excessive. Sure enough, Harry glares and him and Prongs suddenly tosses his head, rearing up on his hind legs, hooves stamping on the marble floor and leaving imprints made of sparks. The message is clear. The sibling relationship between Hermione Granger and Harry Potter-Black is not just for show.

“He can try,” Granger says, her voice laced with sarcasm. “But if by ‘the likes of me’ he means muggles, there are about 5 billion of us around the world and only 500 million of you so I like my chances, actually.”

Some of the wixen around the room are looking staggered by the numbers.

“Numbers don’t matter with wands,” Torquil Travers says, his French accent bleeding through.

“Ever heard of a nuclear weapon?” Granger snaps back and Theo thinks about what a surprise it must be for a Beauxbaton student to be on the receiving end of the ire of Hermione Granger. Surely nearly everyone in Hogwarts is used to it, but it must be disorientating for an outsider. Harry grins up at Granger like she is the best thing he’s ever seen. “What’s the worst damage done by one curse? Twelve people, wasn’t it? Well, the atomic bomb has a head count of 135,000 dead.”

“Fucking muggle lies,” Flint mutters amongst shocked expressions. Nigel Wolpert seems to be trying to count something out on his fingers.

“Open a book,” Granger sneers back. Daphne has twisted around to give Granger a warm, assured smile that makes her eyes dart in panic.

“My sister’s right,” Harry says. A few people mutter at the word ‘sister’. Theo sees the way their eyes drift to Granger with a changed expression. He remembers Granger’s fierceness at her own outcast status as a muggleborn. *This is what it looks like when the wind changes.*

“Lord Gaunt has offered no promises and neither do I. I’m not unrealistic, there are risks involved for anyone who does something Voldemort doesn’t like -,”

Theo forces himself not to twitch but sees nearly everyone else do it. It passes like a ripple around the room. He knows now how powerful Harry’s words are - just saying the Dark Lord’s name aloud is earning him some respectful looks.

“- and like the Minister said, there is a war going on, but it’s not a war to protect Wixen.” Theo watches Harry glare at Minister Malfoy. “Voldemort doesn’t care about you, or your families, all he cares about is his own power.”

“Thank you for your dubious insights,” the Minister sneers, stepping forward in front of Theo, who struggles not to reach for his knife. He imagines how freeing it would feel to pull the blade across Malfoy’s throat, just like he did LeStrange. “But you are a fifteen-year-old with delusions of grandeur. You have no knowledge of how to protect anyone.”

“I’m sixteen,” Harry scowls typically. “Today, actually.”

“Happy birthday!” little Tara Ogden chirrups.

“Thanks,” Harry smiles at her tightly. Theo tries not to think of holding Harry against his chest and whispering happy birthday in his ear as they looked over the lake that morning. Lucius Malfoy is looking at Harry with a predatory smile as if he thinks he has caught him in a trap. Theo’s stomach lurches: *oh fuck, what has he planned?*

“Sixteen year olds are not legal wixen adults and are therefore unable to offer the same kind of protection as grown wixen,” Malfoy announces, his eyes full of malice. “Besides, if Lord Potter-Black Apparent were capable of protecting people, perhaps *this* seat would not be empty”

Malfoy gestures with his wand. A seat is illuminated in the front row. Theo’s stomach lurches when he reads the name of the plaque. *The House of Diggory*. He sees Harry clench his fists. Every crystal scone in the room shatters. *Well*, Theo sighs to himself. *That’s probably to be expected*. All around the room, there are exclamations of dismay. Lucius Malfoy smirks.

“Is it regret, Mr Potter-Black?” He says softly. “For the last time you failed to protect someone?”

I will fucking cut out your tongue, Theo thinks, glaring at the back of Malfoy’s head. Harry is stood as still as a statue, staring at the name on the chair. Theo feels a tangle of complicated emotions that threaten to strangle the breath out of him. He will never be able to see Diggory’s name and not feel a fierce amount of jealousy but he also remembers Harry’s shattered, anguished words after his dream about his ex-boyfriend. Theo can see it on Harry’s tense, enraged face and glinting in his fierce green eyes: fury and pain and so much leftover affection for the boy who should have sat in that seat. Theo can feel sorrow in the bond. Not as strong as the moment Chang kissed Harry and forced him to relieve painful memories of Diggory, but still floating towards him in waves. Sorrow and guilt.

It wasn’t your fault, Theo thinks fiercely. Under the cover of Malfoy standing in front of him, he risks lifting one finger so it just brushes very quickly against the back of Harry’s hand. Immediately, a sharp spark jumps into his palm, as if Harry is full of magic he needs to expel. Theo will not let his face move.

Honour him, Theo thinks through the bond. *Honour him*.

Harry takes a deep breath. Theo pulls his finger away, stinging with lightning.

“Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Gaunt,” Harry says evenly. Lucius Malfoy rolls his eyes but Harry presses on. He turns to the Heirs. “He was the best of us. He was intelligent, he was strong, he was brave, he was the Heir to a pureblooded house going back centuries, not that I think that matters but some of you do and apparent Voldemort *does* care about shit like that, so if all that is true why did Cedric Diggory die?”

Harry pauses. Theo realises he is holding his breath. Harry doesn’t realise, he has no idea, just how powerful a speaker he can be. He is not fluid or dignified but he is brutally, unflinchingly honest.

Every heir in the room is staring at him, utterly in his thrall. *This is why*, Theo realises dazedly. *This is why Blaise and Daphne think he will be a Lord and why I know he will be much, much more.*

“Cedric died because he was in the way. He was *spare*.” Harry continues flatly. Theo's heart clenches. He knows how much that word costs Harry to say. “Lord Gaunt didn't need him so that's why he killed him. Voldemort makes big promises, fame, fortune, power safety, everything you could want, but he only keeps them if it suits him.”

Harry stares at Cedric's seat and the whole room waits for him to finish as if respecting a moment of silence for a fallen friend. Nobody could watch Harry talk about Diggory like this and doubt the sincerity of their relationship. Theo hopes its enough to put to bed those lingering rumours that Harry chased Diggory for the tournament win.

“Cedric Diggory was the best of us and Voldemort killed him because he was inconvenient,” Harry's voice is quiet, raw, but adamantly full of truth. There's magic in his voice, tight and coiled, and Theo wonders how much of Magnus' lessons he is having to utilise in his self-control. “Voldemort's word means nothing.”

Harry says the last four words fiercely. *As if he's trying to convince himself*, Theo thinks, remembering the painful moments of hesitation in the Ministry when he was unsure if Harry would go with the Dark Lord.

“And yours does?” Marcus Flint snorts. Harry holds his eyes steadily and Theo's proud of his strength.

“If I have a treaty, I honour it,” Harry says slowly. “If you stand with me, I will stand with you. I offer that.” Harry stares at Diggory's seat. “I couldn't protect Heir Diggory, but at least I keep my word.”

You did everything you could, Theo thinks fiercely. *It is not your fault he died.*

Harry turns as if glancing toward the minister but his eyes flicker over Theo for a second and Theo feels a warmth in his blood. It's the bond, full of love and gratitude. In the quiet left by Harry's words, a bell rings out, a distant gong, and Heir Marchbanks rises, staring sternly down at Malfoy.

“The Ministry lunch break is over, as is this meeting. This was entirely unnecessary if informative. As for you, Lord Black apparent, the notion that you could protect Heir Diggory from his fate when you were only fourteen years old is ludicrous.” Heir Marchbanks' lips form a tight line as she glances between Malfoy and Harry. “I think we all understand where your loyalties lie, Minister.”

With that, she walks out of the room, accompanied by Farley and Flint, who are clearly also ministry employees, with Burke following after, nodding to Malfoy as he leaves. Marina Ollivander walks slowly down the stairs and looks around at the other seated heirs.

“The guidelines for Wizengamot state that when the meeting is obviously concluded at the appointed time, the members do not need the Minister's approval to leave,” she says quietly. “Many of you are far too young to know this, though I suppose that is the reason you are here.”

“You are all valued future members of the Wizengamot,” Malfoy's voice is unflappable. “Anyone able to stay for the follow-up complimentary afternoon tea is more than welcome.”

“Nope,” Theo hears Harry mutter under his breath and Theo hides a smirk. Harry jerks his head at Prongs. The great animal walks back across the stone floor, the many rising and moving heirs pausing to watch the way the golden hooves leave scorch marks upon the stone. Prongs bends his head to Harry. Stood beside Harry with Longbottom still faithfully standing on his right, Theo notices how Prongs’ eyes flicker over towards him. Theo stares impassively back but feels warm, from head to toe. Prongs quickly dissolves.

“He’s really cool, Harry,” Longbottom says earnestly.

“Yeah,” Harry is studiously not looking at Theo but as he turns towards the door, he whispers under his breath so only Theo can hear. “I’m so fucking done.”

Longbottom seems to notice because he instantly moves slightly in front of them, holding a loud conversation with Abbot. Theo stares forward, folding his arms and raising an arm at Daphne, pretending he is waiting for her. Harry puts his boot up onto the chair under the pretence of buckling it. They do not look at one another.

“You did well,” Theo breathes, looking down at his cuffs.

“Only because you were here,” Harry mutters. “You’re so good at it. I can’t stand this shit.”

“Well, then I better always be here,” Theo murmurs back. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Harry smile at his boot.

“You look amazing,” Harry whispers. Theo’s stomach flips. He will not look at Harry, who looks elegant and appropriate and dangerous and utterly delicious. *And had fucking wings for a minute.* He will not.

“As do you,” Theo mutters back.

“Potter-Black,” Minister Malfoy’s voice is slick. The heirs part like water, even Longbottom moves aside. Theo doesn’t. He catches Daphne’s eye and gestures her over, she moves rapidly, her light, silk robes billowing behind her, Apollo Mulciber watching appreciatively.

“Allow me,” she mutters, turning him on the pretence of fixing his lapel pin. Really, she’s positioning him so that he can easily watch Malfoy approach Harry, who already has his arms crossed defensively.

“You look well, Potter-Black,” the Minister mutters, raking his eyes over Harry. Theo bristles. Daphne strokes his shoulders, under the pretence of removing wrinkles but Theo knows she’s reminding him to stay calm. “You were a little ... worse for the wear at our last encounter.”

Lucius Malfoy’s eyes fix on Harry’s hand. The chamber is full of vague chatter, of the heirs gossiping and moving around, but Theo only hears their conversation, even as Daphne deliberately keeps up a soft but vague one-sided dialogue that he can offer small nods of assent to as a cover. Minister Malfoy is so close, inappropriately close, and Theo knows why. *He wants to remind Harry of the cage when he could do anything he wanted to him.* Theo sees Harry’s sharp intake of breath. Theo hopes Harry is remembering everything his Sire has taught him about occlumency.

“Yeah, I do look better,” Harry says evenly. “Which is more than can be said for you. What was it? Dog attack?”

Minister Malfoy smiles thinly.

“It was not,” he says. “It was a werewolf attack.”

Daphne’s hands still on Theo’s pin. She raises her eyes deliberately to meet his. They both know what this means. *The Minister for Magic is coming after Harry’s godfather.*

“A werewolf attack,” Harry repeats. Theo watches his left hand clench and sees a quiet glow in the black ring.

“Indeed,” Malfoy smirks. “Luckily, I have legislation in place to fell the foul beast.”

“I bet you do,” Harry says, voice laced with sarcasm even as his words sound rough. He steps abruptly away from Malfoy without even offering a traditional bow or even an incline of the head. He stands between Theo and Daphne, smiling tightly at Daphne. “Thank you for your words, Greengrass. I appreciate your support.”

“You have it, Lord Potter-Black Apparent,” Daphne says.

The Minister, it seems, is not done, and approaches Harry like a predator stalking prey.

“One more thing, Lord Potter-Black Apparent. I do hope no one will mourn the wolf,” Malfoy sneers, eyes glinting. “When he is put down.”

Theo realises then that Harry hasn’t moved closer to get away from Malfoy. He’s moved closer to get nearer to Theo. This close, the back of their hands can lightly brush against one another under the cover of Theo’s blue robes, Theo can feel the consistent flickering of sparks bursting out of Harry’s fingertips. Harry’s agitated and he needs a circuit breaker. Theo folds his arms and changes his stance so Harry’s fingers can touch his thigh. Sparks disappear into Theo’s leg under the cover of their robes. It’s like being bitten by ants, sharp little stings all the way down to his knee. He does not show any of it, simply keeps up a mildly interesting and neutral expression as Harry stares down the Minister for Magic with the never-ending supply of unflinching distaste he seems to have for the man.

“*Fuck you,*” Harry hisses in parseltongue and Malfoy steps back in surprise. This close, Theo can understand every single word, buzzing through the bond. Theo doesn’t know if it’s just because Harry cannot speak due to the trauma or if he wants to be intimidating, but it’s working. “*You’ve had one of my godfathers, you will not have the other, you death-eating wazzock.*”

It is the hardest Theo has ever had to fight to not laugh. Malfoy scowls and sweeps away and Theo shakes his head minutely.

“Death eating wazzock?” He says quietly. The corner of Harry’s mouth twitches into a smile.

“Appropriate, right?” Harry mutters.

“Harry!” Granger calls. “It’s time to go.”

They all turn to see Granger, the Weasley heir, Lovegood, Longbottom and George Weasley still holding Beatrice Selwyn under a shield, behind them.

“You coming with us, Selwyn?” Harry asks.

“Fred is outside,” George explains. “He can make sure she gets to her grandparents, somewhere nice and safe.”

Theo’s stomach lurches at the notion that Selwyn, only a second year, has to go home to her Death Eater father and face whatever horror he has in store. He supposes there’s maybe a chance that Lord Selwyn might be moved by his child’s decision to leave Voldemort, but based on what he knows about Death Eater fathers, he doesn’t have high hopes. Daphne seems to be having the same thoughts because she turns to Theo.

“I can speak to my father,” she says quietly so only Harry can hear. “Just in case.”

Theo nods and they all look at the second year. Oddly, little Selwyn’s freckled face is split with a happy grin and she is bouncing on the balls of her feet inside her shield.

“Happy sixteenth birthday, Harry!” she squeals. “You’re so old and cool!”

“Thanks, Beatrice,” Harry grins. Theo understands why she was sorted into Hufflepuff.

Outside the courtroom they see Fred Weasley and Magnus standing together in identical poses, both leaning indolently against the wall.

“All well?” Magnus asks lightly, tossing his hair and giving the Minister of Magic a nasty smile through the door to the courtroom where he stands talking to his son. Draco’s eyes never leave Harry and Theo tries not frown.

“Yeah, all good,” Harry says, falling into step beside Magnus with Theo and Daphne behind him. “Mags, what do you know about werewolf laws and adoption?”

Theo smiles. He could have seen this coming a mile away. Harry is going to do everything he can to protect his godfather from the ministry and Theo could not love him more for it.

“Let’s talk about it,” Magnus says, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“We cannot loiter,” Daphne says. Theo is going to stay with her at Greengrass House for the week until some of the inevitable fuss has died down. He nods. He doesn’t want to leave Harry, especially on his birthday, but he follows Daphne into the lift, passing Magnus and Harry and the collection of Weasleys and friends who are all heading to the Weasley home for a party. Harry’s eyes follow him.

“Heading out?” Harry asks Daphne.

“Yes,” she says. Harry runs forward to catch the lift, just holding the door to stop. “Are you going to your birthday party?”

“Yeah, just a dinner thing with these guys and some of the Gyrffindors, Mrs Weasley’s cooking,” Harry blushes slightly, gesturing back to the others who are all chatting in the corridor, conveniently or perhaps deliberately, blocking anyone else moving towards the lift.

“If it’s a dinner on your birthday that makes it a birthday party, Harry,” Daphne says firmly.

“I guess,” Harry shrugs. He speaks to Daphne but his eyes slide to Theo. “I’m sorry you can’t come.”

“We have our own plans,” Daphne says. “Congratulations on your performance today.”

She holds out her hand to shake his and then, as he takes it, she moves forward at an angle, shielding Theo from onlookers.

“You have something on your collar,” she says, brushing Harry's black shirt. Under the cover of her moving close, Harry's other hand darts out and grabs Theo's.

“*Love you,*” he murmurs in parseltongue, before moving his hand up to adjust the collar pin, stepping back. It's the rapid work of a moment, as if Harry and Daphne choreographed it before, but Theo knows they are just both very adept at reading body language. Theo stares into Harry's green eyes that remind him of the green flames of the Triwizard cup. Eternally burning. He can't speak. If he speaks, he will undoubtedly say that he loves him too, that he is so fucking proud of him for everything he has done today. He can't do any of that so he merely nods tautly and touches the fleur-di-lis necklace on his chest. Harry's stepped back, his hand on the door and they are too far apart for words to float through the bond. So instead, Theo hisses softly under his breath.

“*Mine,*” he whispers. It is only a tiny word, anyone else would just think it a hiss of frustration, but he knows Harry has heard it by the smile on his face.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” Daphne says.

“Yes,” Theo smiles back as the doors begin to close. “Happy birthday.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Sixteen

Chapter by [elph13](#)

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (References to suicide/self-harm/depression/suicidal feelings/child abuse).

This time, Severus has a birthday tradition in mind.
Next time, the new moon rises.

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

How was your party?

It was nice. Neville got me a plant that helps with dreams, Hermione got me a book on being a Lord and Ron and Ginny got me some chocolate frogs.

I expected as much from Granger. What else?

Charlie and Bill got me this cool dragon-hide jacket and Fred and George gave me this huge box of sweets which Kreacher's already nicked.

Of course.

Magnus got me the signed Totti shirt which is AMAZING. Luna gave me a turnip and Mrs Weasley baked a really cool dragon cake.

That all sounds lovely.

It was cool. Although I'm pretty sure Magnus was hitting on Bill.

Nothing about that sentence surprises me.

It was weird that Mr Weasley wasn't there.

I'm sorry. You know that it is not your fault.

Yeah.

What else happened?

We played football, five aside, House of Black versus everyone else.

With one steward and two guardsmen, that only puts you at a team of four.

Luna played for us but it was more skipping with Charlie, y'know? Apparently, Charlie likes to skip.

That sounds like a handicap.

We still won, just about. Bill's an amazing goalie but Fred's a really good striker. I think Blaise has been teaching him.

I will pretend I know what that means.

How's London?

It's fine. We're planning a trip to Diagon Alley to purchase a lizard for Astoria. She wants a gecko.

She should get a Komodo dragon.

They are too big.

No, they're not.

You only say that because your frame of reference for big reptiles is a fucking basilisk.

Fair enough. Were there any weird threats from Dark Lords or howlers from Malfoys waiting for you when you got there?

None. Any derision from your Sire and Godfather? I'm sure the Weasleys told them everything.

Not really. Severus has been at Hogwarts all day so I have no idea what he thinks and Remus was really tired.

Well, being your parent is exhausting.

Rude. He looks like hell. I think the transformation is fucking him over.

It's likely, but Professor Snape makes the best Wolfsbane potion there is. He will survive.

Yeah. Magnus is going with him tonight.

I think that will help. Daphne wants to know if you want to go to London at the end of the week, to the Natural History museum.

For the dinosaurs!

Yes. Will you ask Weasley and Granger?

Sure. Is this because you're missing me already?

Perhaps.

I miss you too. Five days is a long time.

It is.

I can't wait for the dinosaurs.

Wear your new jacket.

— — —

“Come with me,” Severus says to Harrison. The child is lying prone on the sofa, throwing his therapy ball up in the air and when he misses it, he tosses a chocolate frog at the house elf, who is sitting on the coffee table. Severus has never watched an elf eat a chocolate frog before and it is utterly disgusting. He seems to be eating the front legs off them and watching the confections wriggle pitifully around on the table before scooping them up and beheading them, nastily. *This is why I have never kept a house elf.*

“Where are we going?” Harrison asks. After the Wizengamot, Lupin took him to a surprise birthday party at the Burrow, a joint affair with Longbottom, the Weasleys and Granger that Severus was unable to attend partly due to a staff meeting at Hogwarts and partly due to maintaining his cover. Harrison came back alone, Bane and Lupin having diverted already to Skye, swiftly changed out of his robes and into a dark blue cashmere jumper that Severus is sure belongs to Theodore, and has been sitting on the sofa ever since, his serpent around his neck.

“Out,” Severus says curtly.

“Why?” Harrison frowns.

“It is your birthday,” Severus says simply. He opens the door. “Come.”

Harrison rolls his eyes and tosses his therapy ball to the elf, who catches it with sticky hands. Harrison pulls himself up and vaults over the back of the sofa with the easy, indolent athleticism that Severus finds so nostalgic of youth, even though as a young man he never possessed it. Harrison shoves his trainers onto his feet and Severus pulls an old, grey muggle overcoat over his shirt.

“Please ask your familiar to make itself unseen,” Severus asks. Harrison does so, as they walk down the garden path.

“Why?” Harrison asks. Severus opens the gate and feels the wards tense and release around them.

“Because there are muggles in Cokeworth,” Severus says simply. “Follow me.”

Harrison does, falling into step with Severus as they walk down the pavements, along the road towards the High Street. Severus notices how Harrison easily keeps stride with him. *His legs are growing.* He gives his child a sideways glance, trying to assess. Severus is just over six feet tall, just like Tobias. Harrison is well on his way. Severus thinks he might even be taller than he was last week. Severus feels a pang for Lily. She may have had Harrison's first cries and first smiles, but Severus has this: the transformation of his son from a young boy to a young man. It's a dart through the heart, but Severus can't stop the sudden realisation: *I have seen so much more of our child's life than she has.* It is obvious of course, yet it still hurts, for so many of those years were years Severus threw away. No matter how many times he tells himself he did not know, it does not make it better. *Years wasted, Lily. I will waste no more.*

“Here,” Severus says, guiding Harry into the Korean takeaway next to the Royal Diner. Severus tries not to think of Black when he sees its grubby windows. *Make him believe it, Snivellus.*

“Huh,” Harrison looks up at the illuminated menu above the counter. “Was this here when you grew up?”

“No,” Severus says. When he was a child, Mr Evans was the only person of Korean heritage living in Cokeworth. In the last fifteen years Birmingham has expanded, swallowing up these old industrial towns and now Cokeworth is merely another feeder town for Birmingham's commuters, but the benefit is at least there is now better food on the High Street than just the old diner and the chippy.

“What should I get?” Harrison asks, frowning at the names of the dishes.

“Let me,” Severus turns to the man behind the counter. “We will have the beef bibimbap, the dumplings, the bulgogi and a side of kimchi.”

“I understood none of those words,” Harrison mutters, his eyes round as saucers. He has taken off those infernal Potter glasses and Severus can see his true eyes shining through.

“You do not need to understand it to enjoy it,” Severus says, handing over some crisp bills. Harrison watches the exchange with an intent that he never has with the wixen money inside the house. It makes Severus uncomfortable until Severus realises what it is. He recognises it, the same wonder he used to have on his face when he saw that Lily had a fresh five-pound note for her pocket money. The incredulity of it, paper money that is so easily given and not coins scrounged from out of the cushions of Tobias' chair. Severus does not need to imagine how little muggle money Harrison has held in his hands in his life. “We shall wait outside.”

They sit on the small wooden bench in front of the glass window. It is a warm night and patrons at the pub across the road are standing outside, smoke from cigarettes furling into the air and the amber beer in their glasses glowing in the gold light from the windows. Above them, the bulbous round moon is reflecting a glow off the puddles in the road. Severus wonders how Lupin is faring and tries not to think of bones breaking and reforming.

“Do you think Remus is okay?” Harrison says quietly, his mind clearly uncannily landing in the same place as Severus’. “He was so tired today.”

Lupin had returned early that morning, stumbling in through the door and looking almost as pale as the day Bellatrix had tried to rip his leg off.

“Here,” Severus shoves a pain relief potion into Lupin’s hand and guides him to the sofa. Lupin is trembling and tosses it back with heavy gulps, letting his head rest against the arm of the sofa with a groan. “You should have stayed in Skye.”

“It’s his birthday,” Lupin says hoarsely, “and the Wizengamot. We’re having a party.”

“You cannot go to a party if you cannot walk,” Severus snaps, eyeing the wolf with both irritation and worry. “The location of the discomfort?”

“All over but especially my knee,” Lupin winces. “I don’t ... I don’t know if it re-set right.”

“May I?”

Lupin nods. Severus sits on the coffee table and reaches for Lupin’s knee cap, Luckily, it is the opposite leg to the one Bellatrix nearly ripped off, but that is the only lucky thing. Severus feels how it is floating and the ligaments have not healed correctly. Lupin hisses breath in through his teeth and presses a clenched fist against his forehead.

“I can relocate it, but I shall need to perform a medical rune sequence,” Severus says.

“Medical runes are still illegal here, Envouter,” Lupin mutters.

“You weren’t complaining last time, and it is only illegal if one is caught.”

“You sound like Harry.”

Severus pops the kneecap back in and Lupin grunts, giving him a filthy stare from one amber eye. Severus raises his eyebrow and Lupin closes his eye. Severus takes it as assent. He gestures his wand over the kneecap, drawing sequences that will heal the ligaments correctly.

“Ah, fucking fuck, sodding Merlin above,” Lupin gasps, tipping his head back with a groan.

“If I ever wonder where our child gets his filthy tongue from...” Severus mutters. The pain in medical runes only gets worse as it goes on and Lupin’s curses soon become unintelligible groans, sweat beading on his forehead. Then it is over and Lupin slumps. Severus wordlessly summons a damp cloth from the kitchen and places it against the wolf’s head.

“Thank you,” Lupin murmurs.

"I shall come with you tonight," Severus rubs his thumb against the planes of Lupin's face, watching the frown lines soften under his touch. He remembers Lupin's grim prediction about his own death, lungs or heart pierced by broken ribs during transformations. Severus will not permit it.

"It's his birthday," Lupin opens his eyes and looks up at Severus. "He's sixteen. It matters."

"Not as much as your life."

"Theodore has to return to the Greengrass house this evening. Harry's meeting Malfoy again for the first time since he was captured." Lupin swallows hard and takes a heavy breath. "His nightmares will be worse. One of us needs to be here tonight."

Severus nods. "Then you will take Bane."

"He will be fine," Severus says. "Bane is with him."

Harrison looks at Severus carefully for a moment and then up at the moon.

"It gets harder for him as he gets older, right?" Harrison asks quietly. "More dangerous?"

Severus swallows back his surprise at his son's insightfulness.

"He will be fine, I have sent him with many potions and Bane knows to bring him back immediately if his life is in immediate danger," Severus realises that he has not answered the question. "Yes, it is more dangerous. No human body is designed for such brutality."

Harrison nods and then shakes his head, an angry look forming on his face.

"It's so fucking awful," Harrison mutters.

"Language," Severus says.

"It's so bloody awful," Harrison corrects, "the laws under the Congregation make life so much better for werewolves, Blaise told me about them. Why don't we do that?"

"Because in the United Kingdom, our government operates on a thesis put forward by Yardley Platt in the 15th Century that posits that magical creatures are either made of Dark magic or Light Magic," Severus explains.

"That sounds stupid," Harrison scoffs. "So someone just decided that werewolves are inherently evil?"

"Platt did," Severus says. "Werewolves, Vampires, Daemons, goblins, he designated them all as created from Dark Magic whilst unicorns, phoenixes, house elves and others were all designated as light. Of course, he was also a notorious goblin killer."

"And no one questioned that?" Harrison frowns. "A bloke's just out there, offing goblins and calling them all evil? And people based *laws* on what he said?"

"They did. They still do."

“Why?” Harrison stares at Severus in astonishment. “I mean, anyone who’s met Remus and anyone who’s met *Kreacher* can see that’s surely bollocks!”

Severus snorts with suppressed laughter. His child has a point. Harrison looks at him with the same incredulity he always does when he accidentally makes Severus laugh. Then he smiles, furtively.

“The reason why is simple,” Severus sighs and looks at the moon. “British Wixen believe in the fantasy of our own superiority. We have done since the time of Merlin.”

“I don’t understand,” Harrison frowns down at his scuffed trainers. “I’m not a Wixen, not completely, but like ... Can’t a person be a Creature and a Wixen too? Like Remus, he’s a werewolf but he’s still part of the Wixen community, like ... I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t,” Severus says quietly. “But fear breeds prejudice and prejudice breeds resentment.”

Harrison looks at him like he’s speaking mermish, but Harrison was not raised Wixen. He does not know the fear that is passed down in those communities, the horror stories that keep identities hidden more thoroughly than the statute of secrecy ever could. He wasn’t raised hearing hushed tales of how some werewolf or vampire feasted upon a muggle and nearly exposed entire Wixen villages. He wasn’t taught to think of Creatures as a threat to his own survival.

“Well, I’m more afraid of Death Eaters than I am of Creatures,” Harrison mutters. Before Severus can answer, the order number is called. Severus rises to pick up the two plastic bags, handing one to Harrison to carry. He sets off in a different direction from Spinner’s End. When Harrison hesitates, Severus jerks his head.

“Come,” he says. “I have something to show you.”

“Okay,” Harrison jogs to catch up with him. Severus hears him hissing under his breath and assumes he is talking to the serpent. Severus has implemented a daily blood replenisher into Harrison’s regiment and has been watching him carefully for signs of chronic blood loss, but Harrison is as healthy as he can be, given everything he is recovering from. “Where are we going?”

“Just here,” Severus says. He stands outside of number 6, Ashdell road and stares at the boarded-up windows of the Evans household.

“Why?” Harrison frowns.

“This is where your mother grew up,” Severus says. “Follow quietly.”

Severus leads the way up the garden path and across the overgrown lawn to the side gate, that leads into the old back garden. The old swing seat is rusted, the white paint on it peeled, but Severus casts a quick silencing spell upon the joints and then sits, gesturing for Harrison to join him. Harrison does, gingerly, and stares around at the rose garden, left to go wild, and the fallen figs underfoot.

“So ... this is weird,” Harrison says conversationally. Severus says nothing and waves his wand so the old bird bath lifts from its spot and lands with a crunch in front of them. He begins to pull the styrofoam cartons out of the bags and opens them, handing Harrison a wooden fork.

“This is marinated and grilled beef, these are steamed dumplings with chicken and vegetables inside,” Severus points his fork to each dish in turn. “This is a rice dish topped with vegetables and beef and this is a type of fermented cabbage.”

“Fermented?” Harrison stares in amazement. “What, like, gone off?”

“Aged,” Severus digs his fork into the kimchi and then spears a dumpling. The sour sharpness along with the rich fatty dumpling is perfect. Harrison watches him chew and swallow before copying him and taking a tentative bite. His eyes widen.

“Good?” Severus asks. Harrison nods and begins to hiss. “She can resume visibility now.”

“Okay. She wants some egg.” Harrison takes some poached egg from the bibimbap and offers it to the serpent as she shimmers into invisibility. Severus watches with amusement as the serpent flickers her tongue against the white flesh and then rears back, before hissing and slithering away.

“Not good?” Severus asks, amused.

“Not raw enough, she’s gone looking for fresh ones,” Harrison mumbles, shovelling it into his mouth and swallowing. Severus spares a thought for every blackbird nest in the vicinity. “So Mum lived here?”

“Yes.”

“But no one lives here now?”

“No.” Severus takes another dumpling and looks at the back of the house. “I believe it is owned by Petunia though she has never sold it.”

Severus might think it is sentiment if he didn’t know Petunia so well. She is waiting for the market to rise and for Cokeworth to gentrify enough to make a sale worth the effort.

“Did you just ... want to show it to me?” Harrison digs his fork into the beef.

“You asked about your history. About your family. I said -,”

“You said I should ask for a secret, on my birthday,” Harrison nods with comprehension. “Will you tell me now?”

“I shall,” Severus nods. Since Harrison asked this question, he has been considering how to answer it. “I propose you ask any questions you wish for the course of this meal and I shall answer truthfully, providing it is relevant to your family history and is ...” Severus hesitates for the word. He wants to give this to Harrison, but there are also things he will not answer. *Things about Lily.* “...appropriate.”

“Okay,” Harrison chews slowly and looks down at the food. “So my Grandad was Korean?”

“Your great grandmother was, yes.” Severus looks down at the food. “I cannot tell you as much about her and your great grandfather as you might like. By the time Lily and I started Hogwarts, your great grandfather had died and your great grandmother was living in a nursing home.”

“She was ill?” Harrison frowns.

“Dementia,” Severus says. “She died in 1983.”

“After Mum,” Harrison stares at the fork in his head. “Did ... I mean, did she know?”

“No,” Severus shakes his head. “She was never aware that Lily was a witch and by 1981 her dementia was so advanced that I do not believe Mr Evans would have needed to tell her of Lily’s death.”

“That’s ... I don’t know if that’s sad or not,” Harrison mumbles. He takes a slow, reflective bite of kimchi, and Severus suddenly wonders if this is a good idea.

“I ... regret that I am unable to give you a happier story regarding the Evans family,” Severus says quietly. *I regret I am unable to give you more family than just myself.* Harrison shakes his head.

“When Hagrid told me about Mum and James and how they really died ... I wasn’t sad, even though it was a really sad story,” Harrison pokes his fork into the bibimbap. “It doesn’t have to be happy, it just has to be the truth.”

“That I will give,” Severus says solemnly. Harrison nods.

“So ... Did they eat a lot of this kind of stuff, then? Did my Mum like it?” Harrison asks.

“They did not eat this type of food on a daily basis since your Grandfather was the one to cook it, but he cooked it for special occasions, like New Year. Your mother -,” Severus can’t help the wry smile on his lips as Harrison takes the last dumpling. “Loved dumplings and would always find a way to eat the last one.”

Harrison grins at him and pops the last mouthful between his lips. Severus can almost hear Petunia’s voice: *it’s not fair, she always takes it!* Lily’s laughter and returning giggle: *you’ve just got to be quicker, Toney!*

“What did they do?” Harrison asks after swallowing.

“Your grandfather was a doctor, a general practitioner. Your grandmother was a primary school teacher until Lily started to show her power. She went back to work when Lily began Hogwarts.”

“So she was around then? When you were young?” Harrison asks. “I know my Grandma died before I was born and my Grandad straight after but ... you knew them a long time, so ... what were they like?”

“Kind,” Severus says quietly. “Generous.”

“To you?” Harrison presses.

“To me,” Severus nods and stares at the garden steps that go down to the backdoor. Remembers the many evenings he sat on them, eating a Mrs Evans fish finger sandwich. “To my mother, also.”

“Your ... *Ahneh?*” Harrison tries, and Severus is suddenly, viciously proud of his child’s attempts to speak Turkish.

“Yes.”

Severus finds he cannot offer information about Eileen. Harrison will have to ask. The child is poking his fork into the kimchi with a frown on his face.

“She was ... Turkish,” Harrison speaks slowly. “But ... your grandparents, they weren’t?”

“I have no notion of the parents of Tobias,” Severus says flatly, “but Eileen’s parents were not native Turks. They were Iranians who had fled conflict then again when Eileen was young, her mother died and her father brought the family here.”

“So it was just your Mum and your Grandad?” Harrison looks at Severus sharply. “What did you call him?”

Severus hesitates.

“Can I not ask that?” Harrison asks wearily.

“In the House of Prince, names are secrets,” Severus says softly. “His name died with him but ... Eileen called him *pedar* and so did I. In the little time I saw him.”

“*Pedar*,” Harrison repeats. Severus’ heart jumps a little to hear that word on his child’s lips. “What does it mean?”

“It is a Persian word,” Severus’ voice does not betray the longing inside it. He will not permit it. *This child has already given me more grace than I could ever deserve.* “It means Father.”

“Wait, if names are secrets ... does that mean you have a different name?” Harrison frowns.

“Yes, I have a muggle name or an outward name, and my Prince name, an inner name.”

“Is it ... a secret from me too?” Harrison looks so cautious that Severus feels his heart cramp.

“Names can be given to Heirs,” Severus nods. “Give me a piece of paper from your notebook.”

Harrison reaches for his journal, which seems to have changed colour since yesterday, and rips a piece of paper out of the back of it. He hands it over to Severus with a blue biro and Severus carefully writes his names down. Severus tries to stamp down the excitement inside him. *This means nothing.* Yet he cannot deny the truth. There is only one person in the world he would give this name to. His son. He hands Harrison the piece of paper and his child stares at it.

“There’s no way I can pronounce that,” he says flatly.

“Severus Hüsrev Esfandiyār Šāhzādeh,” Severus whispers carefully, speaking slowly and pointing his finger at each name in turn. “This will be the only time I speak it to you. Our names are secrets, Harrison. They are whispers. We guard them like all others.”

“*Negahbane raaz.* So *Šāhzādeh* means Prince, then. ” Harrison mutters, and Severus is absurdly proud. “Wait, do I have a Prince name?”

“You ... yes, you do,” Severus tries not to show the importance of this moment on his face. *I will never pressure him into doing this.* “The names are ... made. The first name is chosen by the parents, the second reflects the homeland and the third is for the legacy and legend of our people. The last is always the same. “

“Okay,” Harrison frowns. “But you ... you haven’t made it yet, right?”

“We can ...” Severus finds the words are too heavy upon his tongue to speak at the moment. *He asked for his heritage. This is what I have to give him.* “... Make it together.”

“Okay,” Harrison shrugs. Severus is staggered by the lightness of him, but the ease and frailty with which this child crashes ever endlessly toward the unknown. “So, Harrison goes first, that’s what Mum chose, right?”

“That’s correct.” Severus watches his child write the first name down, his heart thundering. *It is happening. I am naming my son.*

“What does it mean, the second name reflects the homeland?” Harrison brushes a curl out of his eyes, curls that look so much like Eileen’s. “Where’s our homeland?”

“For my mother, it was Turkey, for us, it is here,” Severus says softly.

“A really British name?” Harrison frowns. “God, I don’t want Merlin . ”

“Artorius,” Severus says quietly. “Arthur was the first muggle King of a united Britain, Artorius was his Roman name.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess that’s okay,” Harrison shrugs and writes it down. Severus does not say that this is the name he always dreamed of for his first child. He merely clenches his fists against his knees and corrects Harrison’s spelling.

“Sounds like your name,” Harrison muses. “Is it Roman too?”

“It is.” He had planned it all with Regulus. Roman names for the firstborn and constellations for all others. *Artorius and Lacerta*. Something painful is happening inside Severus’ chest. He ignores it.

“Cool,” Harrison says. “What’s the third name meant to be then?”

Severus hesitates. It is the hardest to explain.

“The oldest Lord in the family would choose a name from legend, from the land and stories where the Princes were born,” Severus says carefully. “My grandfather chose mine before he died.”

“Okay so it’s something ... Persian then?” Harrison frowns. “Something from a story from Iran? What should it be?”

“Zāl,” Severus whispers. He has known this would be his son’s third name since the child told him, so casually, that they were a house of secrets without even knowing why. *The son who was abandoned by his father only to be reclaimed later.*

“ Okay, does that mean something?” Harrison says blankly.

“He was a great king of legend,” Severus’ voice is hoarse. “He was ... lost as a child due to his father’s blindness. Yet he was sheltered by a great bird, some think ... the bird was like a phoenix.”

Harrison stares at Severus.

“The Potter magic is a phoenix sometimes,” he says quietly.

“It is.” Severus cannot deny it. Potter gave shelter. Lily gave shelter. However he tells the story of his child’s tragic life, they are a bright spot of comfort in its beginning.

“What happened to the child?” Harrison looks down at his paper. Severus notices he has not written the name down yet.

“His father heard the tale of his prowess and begged forgiveness of the Gods above and of his son,” Severus whispered. “They were reunited and the father repented.”

Harrison nods slowly. Then he writes the name. Severus feels joy and pain crashing inside him, all at once. For a moment, he wishes for his grandfather and Eileen, he wishes for Lily, the mother of this child who is being named into the House of Prince. He wishes he had more to offer than himself.

“Harrison Artorius Zāl Šāhzādeh,” Harrison says slowly and then quirks his eyebrow at Severus. “Sounds weird.”

“It is perfect,” Severus says hoarsely, taking the piece of paper and running his fingertips over it. When he gets a chance, he will write it in the Prince Grimoire. *My son’s inner name.*

“Not gonna lie, it doesn’t seem like a name for everyday use.”

“It isn’t,” Severus says, folding the paper and slipping it reverently into his pocket. “We never use them. They are known only between Lords or parents and heirs. If you had a sibling, you would not know their inner name.”

“Secret names,” Harrison shakes his head. “I guess the clues in all the whispers. So your Granda-your *pedar*,” Severus’ heart skips when Harrison speaks the word. “He named you but he didn’t see you?”

Severus takes a few more bites and considers how to explain the complications of his upbringing.

“He did not.”

“Did he not get on with your Mum then, after her Mum died?” Harrison asks.

“I cannot imagine he was a particularly paternal parent,” Severus says drily. “He cut Eileen off when she married Tobias.”

“Then how are you Lord Prince?” Harrison frowns, staring at their rings.

“Because even though he longed to spite her, there is nothing more important to Princes than legacy,” Severus cannot stop the bitterness creeping into his voice.

“So she wasn’t the Heir to the House of Prince, you were,” Harrison mutters. “Was it because Tobias was a muggle?”

“Yes,” Severus says. He wishes he could say that it was because Tobias was a brute and an alcoholic and his grandfather thought to help Eileen see the truth about him, but that would be a lie. His grandfather was as elitist as any pureblooded Lord, despite his lack of fortune and the obscurity of his title and name. “But when one believes one has a calling to serve Magic, one is desperate to preserve any kind of lineage, even a half-blooded one.”

“So he picked you,” Harrison’s eyes are full of understanding. “You said it was when you were really young, so he died -,”

“When I was nine years old, yes,” Severus nods.

“What ... what do you know about him?” Harrison asks.

“Too little,” Severus cannot hide his disappointment that he was of no interest to the last Lord of the House of Prince except as an heir. “I know the words inscribed upon his tombstone, inscribed upon the grave of every Prince Lord.”

“What are the words?”

“ *Do not look for me, for I am made of shadows. You shall not see my footsteps.* ” Severus feels the hair on the back of his neck rise up, just to speak them aloud.

“Made of shadows, that’s funny,” Harrison chews on some rice. “Remus and I call you ‘Shadowman.’”

“I am aware,” Severus says drily. “Though I doubt it is because of anything I have said.”

“You’re right, it’s because of Eliot,” Harrison nods.

“The poet?”

“ *Your shadow at evening rising to meet you,* ” Harrison quotes between swallowing. “ *I will show you fear in a handful of dust.* ”

“ Hmph,” Severus feels irritated and impressed at both Lupin’s and his son’s insight. “Interesting notion.”

“Yeah. So you were a Lord at nine? When was the ...?” Harrison gestures to Severus’ collarbone. Severus knows he is referring to the rune marks carved into his skin.

“Later,” Severus says shortly. Harrison nods and stares at his hands.

“Do you ever ... I mean, people talk about the Black madness, you know. They talk about Bellatrix and Sirius’ mum and how it’s in the magic ... That’s bollocks, I know it is, but sometimes I wonder ... if it’s like what Sirius said that one time. That it’s in the blood.” Harrison hesitates and looks down at the cut on his left hand. The self-inflicted wound of his own despair. “With your Mum, with Eileen, do you ever think about that?”

So many times. Severus thinks of his spiral almost into alcohol after Regulus’ death. *Like father, like son, Severus.*

“I have done, in my ... more despairing moments,” Severus swallows hard. “Grief is a kind of madness.”

“Yeah, it is,” Harrison says quietly. “How did she die?”

Severus wishes for any other question but this.

“By her own hand,” Severus remembers the salt in the circle, her body spread out.

“How old were you?” Harrison whispers.

“It was in the summer of my third year,” Severus remembers losing Lupin and coming home from school to find Eileen’s corpse in the cellar and Tobias in the pub. *He didn’t even notice she was fucking dead.*

“ Fuck,” Harrison mutters. For once, Severus doesn’t correct him. He is too intent of making sure what he says next is completely understood.

“It is not the same, my mother’s sorrow and yours or mine,” Severus says firmly. “Our blood carries many things, I am sure, but Princes survive , *farzandam*. You are not destined for inevitable self-destruction.”

“Then why did she ...?” Harrison’s eyes are wide and focused, without cruelty. He simply wants to know, he doesn’t realise he is asking a question that Severus has had screaming in his innermost heart since he was fourteen years old. Severus takes a deep breath. When he speaks, it is not only to the child he has sired but to the child inside of him.

“Because she had a mental illness, *farzandam*. Not the kind of sorrow brought on by grief, her mind was tortured daily from the time of her childhood, I believe,” Severus blinks and looks towards the back doorstep where Mrs Evans often tried to get Eileen to eat, to see a doctor, to leave Tobias. “Then she met someone who trapped her and did not care for her or for her fragile mind and she could not endure it.”

“She ... didn’t have anyone to talk about the edges with,” Harrison whispers. “So they got too sharp and ... killed her.”

Severus could weep with the simplicity and perfection of his child’s insight. The words calm something which has been raw with the desperation to understand for twenty-two years. *She didn’t leave me. She was killed by the cruelty of her own mind.* He takes a few deep breaths, staring at the chipped paint on the red back door.

“Exactly,” he says hoarsely. “That’s exactly what happened Harrison.”

Harrison nods slowly and takes a slow bite of rice.

“That’s why you ask about the edges, you and Remus,” he says quietly. “You both know ... how bad it can get.”

“We do,” Severus says frankly, though he has never told the wolf how his mother died, only that she did.

“I have questions about ... Mum,” Harrison hesitates. “Can I ask them?”

Severus is glad of anything that turns his mind from Eileen’s last moments.

“Proceed.”

“What was her favourite colour?” Harrison asks.

“Green,” Severus’ eyes linger on Harrison’s. They are sharper than Lily’s in a way he doesn’t really understand but incredibly beautiful. “She thought it brought out her eyes.”

“Favourite food?”

“She had a sweet tooth, she loved Parkin.” Severus can’t help smiling fondly because if it is possible to pass down a fondness for treacle genetically, then Harrison would be the evidence of it.

“I’ve never had Parkin,” Harrison muses.

“If the elf can make treacle tart he can surely make Parkin,” Severus says.

“What was her favourite subject?” Harrison asks. “Not at Hogwarts, I know she was great at charms, I mean before, when she was at primary school.”

Severus thinks back, remembering Lily coming home from school with books and drawings and Easter egg baskets.

“Art,” Severus says. “Or physical education. She liked netball.”

A game that Severus understood even less than Quidditch.

“Netball’s alright,” Harrison swallows some kimchi. “Did she like flying?”

Severus doesn’t understand the rhythm of Harrison’s questions but he has a feeling that Harrison is taking these facts, gathering them, and assembling them into a portrait of a woman he never knew.

“She liked to fly on occasion,” Severus has bitter memories of Lily soaring over the black lake on the back of Potter’s broom. “She did not enjoy Quidditch. We often read together at matches instead.”

“Was her best friend Neville’s Mum?” Harrison asks.

“I was her best friend,” Severus says quietly. “Until I wasn’t.”

He expects Harrison to ask about this, but he doesn’t. Instead, he takes another mouthful of rice and chews slowly.

“Did she like poetry?” He asks abruptly.

“Not especially.” Severus looks up at the house, at the bedroom window on the left that was Lily’s. Remembers the small bookcase filled with worn paperbacks. “Lily liked to read muggle science fiction novels rather than the classics.”

“Like what?” Harrison’s eyes are suddenly eager. “Did she ... did she like Doctor Who?”

“Yes,” Severus can still remember watching it on the muggle television inside the house, scoffing at the Doctor’s screwdriver which seemed to be a mediocre wand at best. “She did.”

“What was her favourite place?”

“This garden,” Severus pushes his foot against the floor so the swing sways slightly. “Or the beach, in Skye.”

“You were ... together, right?” Harrison looks at him sharply. “Before?”

Before that night?

“We were a couple in our fourth and fifth years of school,” Severus says. Harrison knows how it ended. He doesn’t need to recount the horrible word, flung at Lily in the Hogwarts grounds.

“And after that?” Harrison presses.

“No,” Severus shakes his head. He hopes he doesn’t need to explain the nature of an unexpected one-night stand with an ex-lover to Harrison, but the child, the absurd child, is frowning like it’s a mystery. *Merlin fucking help me.* Severus struggles for more words. “Your grandmother had recently died. Regulus was gone. We were grieving ...”

Severus lets his words trail away. He hopes Harrison understands the implication of a grief-fuelled coupling made of despair and longing. Then Harrison nods sagely and Severus is briefly relieved, followed by utterly alarmed. *Wait, how does he understand this?*

“Did you love her?” Harrison asks. “Right then? After Regulus?”

“Yes,” Severus says. “But ... differently to how I loved him.”

In Lily, I mourned my past. In Regulus, I mourned my future. Harrison’s eyes are full of recognition. Harrison, Severus knows, understands how grief shapes love. *Diggory and then Theodore.*

“Did she love James?”

Severus sucks in a breath. *I promised I would tell the truth.*

“I believe so,” Severus says quietly. “Lily would never have agreed to marry a person she did not love.”

Harrison nods and looks at his hands.

“Did she want me?” Harrison’s question is not really asked to Severus, more to his knees, and Severus realises that the fraction of his memory that Harrison witnessed, of him and Lily weeping and Severus begging for his memory to be erased, has potentially done damage that he hasn’t anticipated.

“They were trying to have a child,” Severus says simply. “She told me. You were wanted.”

“No. Not me.” Harrison looks up at him with weary eyes. “They wanted *their* child. His child.”

This is the hardest thing Severus has ever had to say, he thinks, but he will say it. For Harrison.

“He blood adopted you. He intended ... they intended to keep you and raise you as a Potter,” Severus forces the word out and tries not to let his own bitterness at Potter’s presumption seep into them. “He died for you. You were his child.”

“I don’t ...” Harrison huffs in frustration and kicks his trainer against the earth, swinging them gently. “I don’t understand why.”

Severus is unsure if Harrison is confused by the notion of a man blood adopting a child of a man who he hated or the notion that James Potter would die for him.

“I cannot make an account for your stepfather’s actions and decisions regarding your adoption but he died for you, I presume because he loved you.” Severus hesitates. “I know that he loved you.”

“How?” Harrison mumbles. “He hated you.”

Severus decides, then and there, to give James Potter the honour that was never given to Severus. He will speak of him kindly.

“Your stepfather was not kind to me as a boy,” Severus begins, keeping his voice as even as possible. *Hades below this is fucking onerous.*

“He was an utter dick,” Harrison scowls. *Too fucking right he was,* Severus thinks.

“But horrible boys can still grow into good men,” Severus continues.

“Can they?” Harrison frowns. “All the shit grown-ups I know were all definitely shit teenagers.”

This is the trouble, Severus thinks, with a Dark Lord that recruits young. The choices of children follow them into their adulthoods. It is the question that wakes Severus, sudden and bleak, in the middle of the dark night. *Can people truly ever change?*

“Language,” Severus says quietly. “It is likely that your stepfather would never have been kind to me or I to him, but he was certainly capable of kindness to others. He was endlessly patient with your godfather and he loved your mother with complete devotion. I believe he could love you too.”

Harrison nods slowly.

“You call him my stepfather,” Harrison says.

“Because he was,” Severus says, *and because I cannot, under any circumstances, say his name without disgust.* Harrison nods.

“It helps, calling him that. It helps ... this,” he says softly, gesturing between the two of them. Severus does not understand how, but he nods.

“Do you have any other questions?” Severus asks.

“I don’t think so, not right now,” Harrison frowns. “Will I have to use secrets if I have others?”

“You have three secrets from tonight until your next birthday,” Severus says. He’s decided to keep the tradition. “But you do not ever have to use a secret to ask about your mother.”

Harrison nods.

“It’s my turn then,” Harrison says, brushing his hands against his jeans.

“Excuse me?”

“At Christmas, I mean at Yule, when you gave me the secrets, I gave you three back,” Harrison glances up at them. “Do you want them?”

Severus has not expected this but he will gladly take secrets from such a taciturn child.

“I do.”

“Okay.” Harrison brushes his trainers against the grass thoughtfully. “It was a time turner. That’s how we freed Sirius in third year.”

Severus stares at him. *A time turner?*

“What?” he demands, unable to stop the rudeness of his tone. Harrison bites his lip as if he knows this is something that is going to make Severus furious and is trying very hard not to laugh. *You little shit, where in holy hell did you get a time turner?*

“Hermione had a time turner for her lessons and Dumbledore told us to use it to free Buckbeak and to -,”

“Albus told you? *Albus* told you?” Severus could strangle the man with his own beard. “Time travel is exceptionally dangerous, the notion that two thirteen-year-olds could -,”

“We did fine!” Harrison protests. “Second secret - it was me who threw the firework into Goyle’s cauldron in second year.”

“Of course it was,” Severus pinches the bridge of his nose. *I fucking knew it, you little toerag.* “What is the last secret? What else did you steal or destroy?”

“Nothing,” Harrison takes a deep breath and Severus prepares for some terrible, deep, horrid secret. He imagines something Petunia did, or some measure of self-harm Harrison has committed without Severus’ knowing. His eyes rake the boys covered arms, almost desperate to push back the sleeves and check for cuts. “I got an Exceeds Expectations in Potions.”

Severus stares at him, unable to process.

“Repeat that,” he says. Harrison gives him a slightly rueful look and pulls a crumpled envelope out of his pocket. He hands it to Severus, who looks down at the stamp: OWL EXAMINATION BOARD, ROME.

“They were here when I got back from the party,” Harrison says.

“May I read them?” Severus asks. It’s odd, he thinks, to see that his own hands tremble slightly, but so much has gone into trying to help Harrison pass these exams. Harrison nods. Severus slowly withdraws the parchment from the envelope.

Harrison James Charlus Potter-Black - Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations

Passing grades: Acceptable 51 - 70 Exceeds Expectations 71 - 89 Outstanding 90 - 100.

Failing grades: Terminated 0-10 Dreadful 11-25 Poor - 26 - 50

Theoretical Examinations:

Charms Written Exam (72)

History of Magic Written Exam (71)

Potions Written Exam (71)

Transfiguration Written Exam (72)

Practical Examinations:

Astrology Practical Exam (70)

Charms Practical Exam (98)

Care of Magical Creatures Practical Exam (75)

Defence Against the Dark Arts Practical Exam (100)

Divination Practical Exam (50)

Herbology Practical Exam (88)

Potions Practical Exam (89)

Transfiguration Practical Exam (98)

Total grades:

Astrology - Acceptable

Charms - Exceeds Expectations

Care of Magical Creatures - Exceeds Expectations

Defence against the Dark Arts - Outstanding

Divination - Poor

Herbology - Exceeds Expectations

History of Magic - Exceeds Expectations

Potions - Exceeds Expectations

Transfiguration - Exceeds Expectations

Severus stares at the paper. In it, he sees all of Harrison's recovery. He sees how Harrison has struggled with the written word and how each day of his exams Severus sent muscle balm to help his hand cope with writing for long periods of time. How his grades in the theoretical examinations likely reflect how he did not have the stamina to complete every paper, or how his handwriting

became more illegible as the exam went on. He sees Harrison's frankly astonishing practical grades in anything that required wand work. Theodore has consistently marked the highest for Charms throughout the year, yet Harrison somehow has the same practical grade as him. The theoretical exams show that Harrison's prowess does not come from knowledge or skill, it is innate to his being. *This is Mage power in full force.*

"It's the ceiling thing, right?" Harrison says as if he can read Severus' mind. "In Transfiguration and Defence and Charms? I don't ... I don't have to think very hard to get what I want if I'm using a wand and my heir magic, so it's not even like, I dunno, like they're real scores -,"

"No, Harrison, that is incorrect," Severus knows how hard the child worked. He will not allow Harrison to belittle his achievement just because some things come naturally to him. "They are very real scores. You worked hard under exceptional circumstances. Every single one of these scores is earned."

"Even Potions?" Harrison grins. Severus looks down at the scores again. A 71 and an 89. It seems that in the practical exam, Harrison was on the cusp of an Outstanding. No doubt a combination of his natural cooking skills and being in a more positive environment than the one Severus' has cultivated for him in the classroom over the last five years. Severus swallows hard. He feels proud when he has no right to be.

"These scores were achieved in spite of ... great difficulty," *in spite of me*, Severus thinks. "Your success is entirely your own."

"Not quite," Harrison looks down at his feet. "All rhythm is song, right? You helped."

Severus feels a tightness in his chest. *I helped.*

"Well done," Severus says. "With these scores, I shall expect an impressive showing for your NEWTS."

"I dunno, we'll see," Harrison mumbles, blushing violently. "The Potions thing might be a fluke."

"I do not think so," Severus says drily. "I have a feeling you shall find this year more acceptable."

"Oh yeah?" Harrison looks unconvinced. "Why?"

"Because I shall not be teaching you," Severus says. "I will be taking the Defence post."

Harrison stares at him.

"You can't do that," he says.

"Why would I not?"

"Because it's cursed!" Harrison stares at him like he's an idiot. "No one has done it for more than a year."

"If I am still teaching Defence in a year, I shall wish for a curse," Severus says tartly.

"If you don't want to teach it why are you doing it?" Harrison demands.

“Because it is what is required of me,” Severus says. Albus has asked so he will answer, Albus wants Horace so that is who he will get.

“So you’ll be teaching me defence?” Harrison raises his eyebrows and then looks down at the paper in Severus’ hands. *100% in Defence*.

“Do not worry, you will learn something,” Severus says wryly. “In Potions also.”

“Is the person replacing you any good?” Harrison asks. Severus appreciates the hand Horace had in his education as a young man but compared to the Masters of Europe, Horace’s potions skills are not astonishing. Yet Severus knows Harrison will fare better in a classroom led by someone other than him.

“He will serve,” Severus says. “When he does not, you can utilise your birthday gift.”

“Huh?” Harrison frowns. “You already gave me a gift. Remus gave it at the party, it was a pair of new trainers.”

Harrison lifts a foot. They are a pair of muggle trainers that Lupin travelled into Muggle London to retrieve. They are black with white stars upon them in a pattern that reminds Severus uncomfortably of Harrison’s Canis Major tattoo, but that is no doubt why Lupin selected them, and Severus could not deny the child’s need for new shoes, even if they seemed absurdly expensive for what look to be essentially replicas of the tennis shoes Lily was forced to wear in primary school. Lupin’s only response to that comment was; “they’re converse, they’re meant to look like that.” Severus had answered with “what are they conversant in?” which had only received a droll roll of the eyes. It was then he had decided an additional gift was necessary. Severus pulls a wrapped gift from inside his jacket and hands it over. Harrison unwraps it.

“Advanced Potions Making?” Harrison opens the cover and his eyes widen as he sees the moniker scrawled on the first page. He stares up at Severus. “It was yours?”

“Yes,” Severus nods. “With many additions that later became the subject of my Mastery. Also ...” Severus swallows hard and flicks to the back page. Scrawled at the bottom in all too familiar writing, the only reason he has kept this book for so long: *I love you* beside a crudely drawn lily flower and a smiley face. Harrison’s fingers tremble as he traces the words.

“Mum?” Harrison whispers. Severus nods. “I thought you’d broken up by the time you were doing NEWTS -,”

“We had,” Severus looks at the scribbled words with infinite pain. “We both excelled at Potions. When we were together, academics were a large part of our courtship. We bought our sixth-year textbooks a year in advance, hoping to ... impress.”

A half-blooded Slytherin and a muggleborn Gryffindor. They both had so much to prove and their competitiveness fed one another. Their OWL results were only rivalled by Lupin that year, though it seemed like a poor prize when he received his results and had lost Lily.

“Courtship,” Harrison looks up at him sharply. “How many gifts?”

Severus swallows hard. This is not a question he expected. It hurts to answer.

“Four,” Severus whispers.

Harrison stares.

“It was ... serious then,” he looks down at his mother’s handwriting. “It really mattered.”

“It did.”

“But you met Regulus.” Harrison doesn’t speak as if it is a question, so Severus only offers a confirmation.

“I did.”

Harrison nods. He turns a page of the book.

“Did you ... do gifts with Regulus?” He asks lightly. Severus does not know how this has become a conversation about his love life. *I did say I would tell the truth.* He could shut it down, but Severus finds he does not want to. After all, his child is courting Theodore Nott. There will likely come a time when Severus has questions about it that require answers. *Goodwill, Severus.*

“Six,” Severus says shortly.

Harrison’s eyebrows shoot up.

“You meant it then,” he mutters, looking back down at some of Lily’s notes that are drawn on the edges of a recipe. “When you told Sirius you would have married him.”

“Yes.”

Severus does not say that he had a ring. That on the day Regulus fucked Barty after Severus’ NEWTS had finished, it was sat in his trunk in the Slytherin dormitories. That he still has the ring still, tucked away, gathering dust in his desk at Spinners End. Harrison nods slowly.

“You and Remus ...” he asks slowly.

“No,” Severus says abruptly. Talking about the past is one thing, to talk of the present is entirely another. Harrison rolls his eyes like it is completely expected.

“Fine,” he mutters, “but I have something I need to tell you. About Remus.”

“Then proceed.”

“Like, I’ve had this idea,” Harrison begins, starting to swing rhythmically on the seat as if building himself up to it. “It’s a bit weird, it’s not a secret or anything, I’ve spoken to Magnus about it and everything but I just think, like, it might be the answer for loads of things, and, like -,”

“Elucidate, Harrison,” Severus can’t help but snap.

“I think Remus should adopt me,” Harrison blurts out. “Legally, I mean.”

Severus stares at him. *What on earth has this child been thinking about?*

“You do not need to be adopted. You will be of age in a year and you will be a Lord. You have a Steward.” Severus hesitates. “Is it ... emotional reasons?”

Severus does not know how he will feel if Harrison confesses that he wants Lupin to be his father. *Of course he does. He is a supremely intelligent werewolf with extraordinary strength, political prowess and a suitable cardigan collection. Who would not want Remus Plutarch Lupin to father them?*

“No, what? Of course not, I’m happy with how things are,” Harrison frowns. Severus’ heart soars so high he fears it shall burn. *He is happy with us.* “It’s because Lucius Malfoy is going to say Remus scarred him and use it to push through shitty legislation -,”

“Language -,”

“But if he’s my Dad, legally, then that gives him some protection because I’m ... well, I’m me,” Harrison flushes deeply. “I’ve just announced all of these alliances. If he’s my Dad, those people know that legislation against werewolves is legislation against me and they’ll, like, not vote for it because their kids have alliances with me.”

Severus sees the merit in it. He also sees the flaw.

“Harrison, werewolves are not permitted to adopt wixen children,” Severus says gently.

“In England, yeah, but not on the continent, I asked Magnus,” Harrison says eagerly. “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,” Severus nods. This might be quietly ingenious.

“Yeah!” Harrison exclaims, giving Severus a sharp, grateful look. “This way, he’ll be protected.”

“Only as long as you are strong,” Severus reminds him. Harrison looks briefly pensive as he nods.

“But I’m strong now, right?” Harrison says, leaning back on the seat. “Remus is vulnerable as long as we’re here and ... I don’t want him to be.”

Severus understands. Right now, Lupin is running under the moon in wolf form and tomorrow, he will return and Severus will try to help him heal. Severus understands the desire to protect him, even though he knows Lupin would hate the thought.

“Lupin can care for himself,” Severus says because it is what Lupin would say if he were here.

“But we’re a unit, aren’t we?” Harrison’s eyes are fierce. “If he adopts me, not blood adopting, I don’t want another fucking name -,”

“Harrison -,”

“Another *bloody* name then,” Harrison rolls his eyes, “then we’ll all be connected, because I’ll be Lupin’s legally and you and Lupin are, like, whatever, and you and I will still be ...”

Harrison’s voice drifts away. Severus sees what Harrison envisioned as if it were drawn in front of his eyes. A public legal father and a private natural one, the fathers are connected by a secret relationship. *A unit. A family.* He feels a small tug in the tether against his wrist.

“Yes,” Severus looks at the Prince ring on Harrison’s right hand. “We will be.”

“So?” Harrison asks, looking at him hopefully.

“I will discuss it with him,” Severus says. There are benefits to it that Harrison has not pointed out. If they have to flee, having a legal father who is a resident overseas will be a boon. *Also, if one of us dies, the other has the legal ability to protect Harrison wherever he is.* If Remus dies, Severus can break cover and claim Harrison as his natural child. If Severus dies, then nothing changes, Remus and Harrison simply continue as they are. *It is as it should be,* Severus thinks. “It is a good idea, *farzandam.*”

Harrison looks surprised by the compliment and frowns, before blushing slightly.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” Severus says firmly. “You have done well today.”

“Yeah?” Harrison gives him a furtive look. “You’re not mad about ... the Wizengamot stuff?”

He recalls how Harrison had looked in the memory that George Weasley gave him and Lupin to review of the Ministry today. Lupin had been astonished, unable to speak except to say: “*did you ever see Orion do any of that?*” To which Severus had naturally responded: “*did you ever see Fleamont use his magic in such a way?*” Yet Severus had not been angry that his child had done this, had kept secrets with the Weasley twins and organised an effective shift of power under Lucius’ feet. He had been proud. *He is a guardian of secrets, indeed.*

“No,” Severus shakes his head. “You have done something very important.”

“Not really,” Harrison looks suddenly very uncomfortable. Severus wonders if, like himself, Harrison has a limit on how many compliments he can receive before he begins to doubt their sincerity. “All I did was, like, announce our treaties and I didn’t even make them. It was all Fred and Blaise.”

Severus finds that revelation completely unsurprising, given the natural cunning of Fred Weasley and the political prowess of the Zabini heir. Yet Harrison is underselling his own bravery. He considers for a moment, how best to enlighten his child about the true impact of his actions.

“Did you know that Lucius Malfoy is the first Minister of Magic to ever call a meeting of the heirs of the Wizengamot?” Severus asks.

“No,” Harrison frowns. “I assumed it was something the government did occasionally.”

“No,” Severus looks down at the book in Harrison’s hands. “Do you know why it is never done?”

“No. Why?”

“Because the Wixen system of government depends too much upon political stability,” Severus explains. “You will have heard of light seats and dark seats?”

“Yeah, seems dumb,” Harrison grumbles and Severus fights not to smile, because of course his child, this child who speaks with magic and Death and still manages to be so irritatingly adolescent in his manners, finds the organisation of the Wizengamot dumb.

“It is not to do with the nature of the magic which others assign light and dark, however misguided they may be -,” Severus holds up a finger as Harrison opens his mouth to protest and then closes it

again. "It is to do with voting records. Not who the individual has voted for but how their family has aligned generation upon generation, some going back centuries."

"So it's not to do with being a Death Eater?" Harrison frowns. Severus shakes his head. "Then why are so many dark seats Death Eater seats?"

"There are patterns. A child who is raised in a house that is always perceived a certain way is raised to carry on certain traditions, told to vote with certain ideals in mind, told to watch for certain goals." Severus thinks of Avery when they were at school together, how he was terrible at Potions and often looked to Severus for guidance. He was the least politically minded person Severus had ever met. Yet still, when his father told him to take the mark, he did it. "You broke a pattern today, *farzandam*."

"No, I didn't," Harrison frowns. "Everyone expects me to fight Voldemort. I didn't break anything. Theo and Beatrice did."

Severus smiles. It is exactly like his child to not see his own handiwork, the encouragement his own bravery provided, in the choices of the heirs to those dark houses.

"Not all Death Eaters are made in the same way," Severus says softly. "Some are made because they are told there is no other way to be. Today you offered another way to be."

Harrison is looking at him carefully.

"You weren't made that way," Harrison breathes quietly. "You wanted something."

Freedom. Power. To protect those I loved.

"There are a million ways to make a Death Eater," Severus says. "I am only one example."

"Not really," Harrison picks up a piece of beef and swallows it down, sucking the juice off his fingers. He reaches for his pen to scribble in the front of the book. "You're more of an example of how to *un* make a Death Eater, aren't you?"

Severus stares at him. He has never considered until this moment that his son does not consider him a Death Eater. It is like losing a coat on a summer's day. He is lighter and less constricted. He can breathe better.

"Look!" Harrison grins, holding the textbook open for Severus to see.

This book is Property of the Half-Blood Prince and The Black Prince

"I know I'm not just a Black and a Prince but, like, I'm more a Black than a Potter, that's kind of how I feel, like I'm these two the most," Harrison babbles. Severus stares down at the words. There is Narcissa's voice inside his head. *The Black Prince will ride*. "Anyway, it's your book and now it's my book, so now it's got both of our weird nicknames!"

"Yes," Severus says softly. His finger traces his son's words, a little bit of black ink smearing on the paper. *Who we have been, are and will be*. Severus puts no stock in divination but he feels a shiver of premonition. "It is both of us."

They sit in silence for a little while, until Severus notices that the child is shivering slightly and waves his wand at the styrofoam packages so they quickly collect into the plastic bench and

Severus rises.

“We should return home,” Severus says but Harrison isn’t paying attention. He’s staring up at the moonlit sky with a puzzled expression on his face.

“What’s that?” Harrison asks, pointing. Severus squints.

“It ... looks like a paper aeroplane,” Severus says. Harrison immediately jumps to his feet.

“Fuck,” he mutters as he catches it in his hand. Severus’ heart skips when he sees it is bloodstained.

“Harrison?” he asks, pointing his wand at the paper aeroplane.

“It’s from Tom,” Harrison’s eyes are full of weary malice. “He sent one like this on my last birthday.”

“That is the kind of secret I would prefer to know about,” Severus says, keeping his eyes fixed on the paper. “Did it carry any compulsions?”

“No,” Harrison shakes his head. “I had the Black heirship ring then, it would have told me.”

Severus waves his wand, casting quickly to assess any compulsions. It has none. The only terror it potentially carries is the words inside it.

“What does it say?” Severus asks.

Harrison gingerly opens it.

“Shit!” Harrison drops the paper and scrambles back, clambering back onto the seat and looking down at it with a shocked and disgusted face. “What the fuck?”

Severus looks down at the bloodstained paper. Concealed in the centre of the aeroplane is a severed finger. The words on the paper seem to be written in blood: *You will be unblemished.*

“It’s Bellatrix’s,” Harrison’s voice is shaking. “I remember. I ... I saw her hands a lot.”

“It’s the middle finger,” Severus pulls at the paper so the severed digit rolls onto the grass. Severus looks at the paper and the four words. “What was the content of the first letter, last year?”

“He said, ‘I can touch you now,’” Harrison mumbles, pulling his knees up to his chest and pressing his forehead against them. “He said it in the graveyard before he touched my scar and it fucking hurt.”

Severus swallows. He has seen glimpses of the graveyard in occlumency and behind Harrison’s eyes when he wakes from dreams in the middle of the night.

“And this one?” Severus asks.

“In the cage, he said it,” Harrison takes a shaking breath. His whole body is trembling. “That ... that he’d keep me ... safe I guess. If I was his.”

“He has taken Bellatrix’s finger because she took yours,” Severus stares at the words on the page. “He is ... courting you.”

“*Courting?*” Harrison’s head jerks up and he looks incredibly pale in the moonlight. He turns and retches, luckily not vomiting, and Severus quickly pulls an antiemetic potion out of pocket that he always has upon his person for Harrison’s nightmares. Harrison quickly gulps it backwards and gasps, staring up at Severus with desperate eyes. “You mean that he - that he really - that he *wants* -,”

“I do not think so,” Severus says. He wishes he could deny it outright, but he remembers the way the Dark Lord had looked at Draco. “What I mean is that he is courting your favour. He ... wants you to believe his promises, just like Lucius tried to court the favour of the other heirs today.”

“In what fucking world does he think this counts as a birthday present? Like, was he literally never hugged as a child?” Harrison mutters, pressing his face into his knees again. “Can you get rid of it?”

“With pleasure,” Severus says, setting the severed finger on fire with grim delight. He hopes that the Dark Lord took it from Bellatrix’s hand with the same terrible agonising slowness that she tortured Harrison. “It is done.”

He turns to look at his son. For all that Harrison has just turned sixteen and has worn his power with wisdom beyond his years in the Ministry today, now he looks small and young and vulnerable. His body is shaking and Severus sees his familiar winding her way up his leg, hissing melodically in a way that seems to calm Harrison’s breathing.

“Harrison,” Severus gently presses his hand against Harrison’s back. The boy flinches gently. Severus moves his hand in a slow rubbing motion until Harrison’s shoulders soften back down. “It is gone. He does not have you.”

“Yeah?” Harrison mutters through chattering teeth. “Promise?”

“Of course,” Severus says. *Because Lupin and I have you.* “Can you stand?”

“Yes,” Harrison rises on shaking feet but looks determined. He takes the paper from Severus’ hand and, with a sharp blast of the Black magic, reduces it to ash. It is very satisfying to witness. “Let’s go home.”

When they return, Severus waits until he knows that Harrison is changed into his bedclothes and then slowly climbs the stairs to the attic room. He can hear Harrison’s voice and pauses on the threshold of the door.

“...It says here that Lords are meant to have up to twenty house elves traditionally -,”

“Master does not need twenty. Master has Kreacher. Kreacher is more than enough.”

“Too bloody right. Another nineteen of you would be the end of me before Tom even got a look in.”

“Harrison?”

He knocks and pushes open the door. Harrison is in bed, knees up under the duvet cover and a book open on his lap. The elf is sitting at the end of the bed, sewing labels into Harrison's school robes. One has fluttered on the breeze from the open window to land by the door. Severus looks down at it and makes the words in the spidery stitching: *The most noble and terrifying Lord Black*. Severus imagines that the Hogwarts laundry elves will find that an interesting addition. The snake is wrapped around the metal bedpost and seems to be sleeping.

"Hello," Harrison looks up from his book, a frown between his eyebrows. "What's the matter? Is it Remus?"

"All is well," Severus says. "It is time to sleep."

"Okay," Harrison closes his book and looks at him quizzically.

"Theodore has gone. Lupin is in Skye. You saw Lucius Malfoy for the first time today since your captivity." He reaches into his sleeve and pulls out a sleeping potion. He tosses it to Harrison who catches it with his right hand. "I know it does not defer nightmares but it seems to give you at least a few hours in between them. I have more I will administer later in the night."

Severus waves his wand and a single mattress appears on the floor.

"Are you ... staying up here?" Harrison coughs on the potion, looking down as Severus shakes out the blanket and lowers himself onto the mattress, wincing when his knees seem to creak. Still, it shall be easier than climbing those blasted stairs four times a night.

"Yes," Severus answers.

"You really don't have to -,

"I am," Severus says abruptly. After the note from the Dark Lord, Severus feels the absurd need to keep his child within arms reach. *He will not have him. Not whilst I have breath inside me.*

"But -,"

"No," Severus says. He lies down and points his wand at the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling before Harrison can argue. "*Nox.*"

There is a long minute of silence in the darkness where Severus can feel Harrison is deciding whether or not to make a fuss. Severus sighs heavily and waits for a potential onslaught of protestations and maybe some rude hissing, but then he hears the bed creak and a snake hiss and knows that Harrison has settled down. Outside the window, the snowy owl swoops in lazy patterns, wings glossy in the moonlight.

"This is really weird," Harrison mumbles in the darkness.

"Kreacher agrees," the elf mumbles from the end of the bed.

"Like, the world's fucking weirdest sleepover."

"Language," Severus drawls, closing his eyes. "Go to sleep. Both of you."

"Lord Prince does not command Kreacher," the elf mutters.

“Lord Prince is going to sleep,” Severus says calmly. “I suggest you do so also since your protestations will have no impact upon my designs.”

“Fine,” Harrison grumbles and Severus hears the sound of him rolling over to face the wall. Severus listens to his breathing, waits until he thinks it has evened out and then lets out a slow sigh. *He’s safe.*

“G’night,” Harrison mumbles sleepily. “Thanks for the takeaway and stuff. It was ... nice. A nice birthday.”

It is a small word, but it means much. Severus lets it settle into his chest. He knows that when his child wakes, screaming and wreathed in magic and nightmares in a few hours, Severus will feel the worrisome burden of parenthood pressing upon him, but at this moment, he feels almost unbearably light with it. *I gave my child a nice birthday.*

Harrison Artorius Zāl Šāhzādeh. *My son.*

“Goodnight,” Severus whispers. “Happy birthday, *farzandam.*”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: [@elphreads](#)

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

The New Moon

Chapter by [elph13](#)

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags. (Implied dubious consent sexual activity).

This time, dinosaurs!
Next time, the full moon rises.

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

Dear Lord Potter-Black Apparent,

I would first like to congratulate you on turning sixteen years old. Your performance yesterday was enlightening. You have grown and yet I remember when you were a first year. Despite my family's position, I find myself unable to stop thinking of that small boy who stood up to face the sorting hat amid such whispers. I find myself unable to consider the notion of a no wands treaty with that boy, the notion too, that such a young boy should be relied upon as a shield against the Dark Lord is ludicrous. I hope I am not the only person to speak the truth to you - Albus Dumbledore has used you ill, indeed. I hope I am also not the only one to offer a bear wands treaty. I also offer you an ear in the Goblin Liaison Department of the Ministry of Magic, though I hear you likely have little need of it.

May Magic bless you,

Heir Gemma Farley of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Farley

— — —

Dear Mr Potter

Forgive me for the informal address, but I understand from our conversation earlier this week that you prefer informalities. Following your questions, I thought I might direct you towards a particular Wixen legend that might be of help to you. Have you ever heard of the legend of the elder wand? I would suggest you speak to your Wixen-raised friends about it. The House of Ollivander does not ever raise wands in battle, so I can offer you no treaty but you should know that I am a fellow of the Chained Library and we have there the greatest and oldest collection of magical books, outside of the Dee library. I find your questions about the sentience of magic most interesting. I would be happy to host you for a visit sometime.

May your wand always choose you,

Heir Marina Ollivander of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Ollivander

— — —

How's your week going?

Okay. I'm doing alright with voice magic, but it's hard to control.

It is good Bane's shields are unaffected.

Not so great for the birds though. I accidentally compelled a pigeon to fly into the window.

What happened to it?

Kreacher put it in a pie.

So you ate it.

I don't want to think about it. What do you know about the elder wand?

It's a myth. Blaise just sent a note - you signed a Bear Wands treaty with Heir Farley?

Yeah. She said I'm too young for a no wands treaty.

Harry, that makes literally no sense.

It's what she said.

Send me the bloody letter, since you make absolutely no sense and I'm unable to tickle the truth out of you.

Rude. Do you know anything about the Chained Library?

It is maybe the oldest library in the country. It is hosted in the Muggle Cathedral in Hereford. They have a supreme collection of magic texts.

Cool. I might visit.

You might visit the Chained Library?

Yeah, Marina Ollivander says she'd show me around, so?

Theo?

To echo Granger's sentiments - stop hogging the important historical sites.

It was people, not places.

I have adapted it for my use.

I see that. What if I brought you too?

Then I have no complaints.

Noted. I can't wait for our trip to the museum on Saturday.

Me neither.

Dinosaurs are so fucking cool.

I love you.

— — — —

Dear Anzar Ward and Lord Potter-Black Apparent

His Majesty has given me leave to manage your Black accounts as well as your Potter vaults, since he finds himself most preoccupied with your Wizengamot. Thank you for your recent enquiries about the process for your godfather's legal adoption of you. I have spoken with His Majesty and he agrees that this could be a potentially advantageous situation for you given your most recent performance in the Ministry of Magic. If your legal father is employed and living in Italy and France, if you ever have need of refuge outside of England, you can take it there. I have included the paperwork needed in this letter. Hopefully, it can all be signed and returned before you are due back at Hogwarts. I have also sent a copy to SteelClaw for your Sire's reference. His Majesty also urges me to remind you that your khuzdul lessons must increase apace when you are back under Professor Flitwick's tutelage.

The sale of the Potter Mansion continues and His Majesty is very happy with the purchase. He wishes you to know that if you should ever wish to buy the property back, he shall consider selling with only the most reasonable level of accrued interest.

Please be reminded, Anzar Ward, that as an Anzar in training you represent the Silver Hall and his Majesty wherever you go. To this end, His Majesty bids me pass along the following weapon. It is a goblin blade. Anzar Weasley shall instruct you as to where you may purchase an ankle holster.

Congratulations on reaching your sixteenth year.

May your enemies feel the wrath of your blade and sting of your axe.

Account Manager Griphook

Dear Griphook,

It's cool that you're my Black manager too. I wanted to chat about something with you. Can I give someone who's not a family member access to my vault? Like, someone important to me? Like, if I wanted to do it as a ... gift kind of thing? Is that allowed?

The knife is super cool. I like the runes. I translated them it's ... finger slicer? Seems kinda on the nose.

May your enemies tremble at the sight of your many, many accounts

Harry Potter-Black-Slytherin-Prince

Lord Apparent to the House of Black and House of Potter

Heir (am I still?) to the House of Slytherin and the House of Prince.

P.S. What do you know about the House of Peverell?

P.P.S Don't tell anyone about this, but could I be an Heir to a House I don't know about? That didn't show up on my inheritance test?

Dear Anzar Ward and Lord Potter-Black Apparent

In answer to your questions in your first paragraph the answers are all the same: Not under any circumstances.

In regard to your latest weapon, I believe His Majesty chose the name himself. He deemed it appropriate. Perhaps you will enact worthy revenge with it.

In answer to your first addendum: Yes.

If the third addendum is related to the second, I recommend we arrange a visit to the bank. These are matters best discussed on goblin land.

May finger-slicer be steady in your hand and deadly to your enemies,

Account Manager Griphook.

Dear Griphook.

Your answer to my first question makes no sense. When I first came to Gringotts, Hagrid had my key. So you can give keys to other people but they can't use them?

I'm going to muggle London on the weekend, I could drop by Diagon Alley then.

May all of your enemies get stomped on by dinosaurs,

H.P.B.S.P

(It's just easier).

Dear Anzar Ward and Lord Potter-Black Apparent,

What you speak of is a key-guardian. If this is what you desire, it can be easily arranged.

May the fingers of the enemies feel the sting of your blade,

Account Manager Griphook

— — —

“That’s a dragon, Harry.”

“It’s a dinosaur!”

“I’ve seen dragon bones, Charlie showed me, this is a dragon -,”

“C’mon, Ron!” Harry groans. “I’ve seen a Dragon up close and it’s head is not that big -,”

“Oh, saw it without its skin on did you?” Ron huffs, folding his arms and staring up at the skull of the tyrannosaurus rex. “That’s a dragon, Harry, look at the teeth -,”

“It’s a t-rex! It says so on the label!”

“I think we need to have this discussion at a lower volume,” Theo mutters. He’s wearing the same glamour he did in Rome with a few tweaks. He’s taller than usual, more Ron’s height than Harry’s. His hair is much shorter and Harry is enjoying seeing the back of his neck. *When did the back of his neck become sexy?*

“Definitely,” Hermione says, “Muggles don’t need to hear us talking about dragons.”

As if to prove her point, a little boy beside Harry leans against the railing and stares up at the dinosaur bones.

“Woah!” He yells. “A dragon!”

Both Hermione and Daphne roll their eyes simultaneously. They look hilarious next to one another. Hermione’s wearing an oasis t-shirt and jeans and Daphne’s wearing a silk dress with a Peter Pan collar.

“Hey, mate,” Harry says kneeling down next to the little boy. “Don’t listen to this chump, he still thinks magic is real, like he’s four or something.”

“Harry!” Ron exclaims. Harry can hear Theo trying not to laugh.

“Come on,” Harry looks up at Ron expectantly. “Tell this chap how you believe in unicorns, wait -,” Harry looks down at the little boy. “How old are you, mate?”

“Nine,” the boy looks curiously up at Ron. “Do you believe in the tooth fairy then? You know that’s only for babies, like my sister. She’s four,” the boy says conspiratorially to Harry.

“I totally get it, yeah, magic’s for babies, but we both know that *this* - ” Harry gestures up at the dinosaur, “- is a fucking cool -,”

“Harry Potter!” Hermione smacks him around the head with her book from the gift shop.

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry winces. Theo has a hand completely covering his mouth to hide his laughter and Ron is sniggering into his sleeve. “This is a really really *really* cool t-rex, right?”

“Yeah!” The boy grins. “It’s really really *really* cool!”

He jumps down from the edge and runs away towards the triceratops. Immediately, Theo and Ron burst out into laughter.

“Merlin, Harry, you are *shit* with kids,” Ron gasps.

“Your language is abominable,” Daphne looks horrified. “That was a *child* .”

“I said sorry!” Harry protests. “Jesus, can we just look at the dragons - I mean, dinosaurs!”

Theo snorts with laughter and squeezes his arm.

“I think we should move on,” he turns to Daphne. “Any interest in the Ancient Greek artefacts?”

“Yes,” both Daphne and Hermione answer in concert. Ron rolls his eyes.

“I think we’ll hang back, check out this stuff some more,” Harry says. Ron grins.

“Yeah, we’ll catch up.”

Theo gives Harry a smile as he passes and Harry smiles back. They can’t touch or kiss or do anything like that in public, but having Theo around him again after a week of not having him around is amazing. *And tonight, he’ll be back in my bed.* Just the thought of it gives Harry happy shivers.

“How did this happen?” Ron asks as they watch the three of them leave the dinosaur hall, Daphne and Hermione’s heads already bent over the guidebook and Theo strolling behind them, hands in his pockets.

“How did what happen?”

“We went from one Hermione to three,” Ron sighs. “We’re outnumbered, mate.”

“It’s probably fair,” Harry grins. “We’ve been outnumbering her for years.”

“It was a dragon, by the way,” Ron sniffs. “I don’t care what you told that muggle kid.”

“Was not,” Harry points at the triceratops. “What kind of dragon looks like that?”

“Maybe it’s a rare Japanese breed,” Ron shrugs. “Charlie says they have some weird ones. He says you did well at the Wizengamot, by the way. So did George.”

“George was fucking *amazing*, ” Harry says fervently.

“Yeah, he’s well good at this stuff.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Harry stops and looks at Ron. “That, like, they’re doing all this stuff and you -?”

“Do I mind that you’ve literally dragged all of my brothers into politics?” Ron shakes his head violently with a snort of laughter. “Nah, mate, that shit’s over my head. Bill, Fred, George, Percy, they’re the ones who are good at that. They get it from Dad. Me, Charlie and Ginny, we’re all too practical. We’re like mum.”

Harry nods slowly, remembering Arthur’s ease. Arthur’s bravery. The way he hugged Harry when he became the Black Steward. *You did more than enough, Harry.*

“Your Dad was great at it,” Harry says softly. “He was such a good steward.”

“Yeah,” Ron swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he looks into the middle distance. Then he looks back to Harry and smiles. “Everyone said you were super cool, like, scary cool and you *totally* handed Malfoy his arse.”

“Thanks, it wasn’t really me,” Harry scuffs his new trainers along the floor. “It was more Theo than anyone, and Hermione and George -,”

“ They said Malfoy made you talk about Cedric,” Ron says. Harry catches a breath. *Is it regret, Mr Potter-Black? For the last time you failed to protect someone?*

“Yeah,” Harry sighs. “He did.”

“That must have been shit.”

“Yeah,” Harry snorts. “It was.”

Ron sighs heavily and looks up at the dinosaur bones suspended above them.

“He was a good guy,” Ron says quietly. “Diggory. I liked him.”

Harry looks up at the long, stretched neck of the diplodocus suspended on wires. It has been more than a year since Cedric’s death. It strikes Harry that the date of it entirely slipped by him, he was so tangled up in recovering from Bellatrix and the Ministry. He instantly feels a flash of guilt that he let that happen but then hears Remus’ voice inside his head: *it wasn’t your fault, Harry.*

“I liked him too,” Harry says. *Not as much as he deserved.*

“It’s okay, you know,” Ron says. Harry looks into his warm, brown eyes.

“What’s okay?”

“It’s okay that you love Nott more,” Ron shrugs simply. “It doesn’t mean Diggory wasn’t special.”

Harry swallows hard. It's exactly what he needs to hear and precisely the most painful thing to hear. He takes a few deep breaths until he stops seeing Cedric's eyes inside his mind.

“Thanks,” Harry whispers. He looks at Ron fondly. Of course, Ron has grown this summer, the sleeves on his t-shirt are already too tight and he’s cuffed his jeans because they’re an inch too short, but it seems to Harry that Ron’s grown in other ways.

“You’re really smart, Ron,” Harry says quietly.

“Pull the other one,” Ron snorts.

“No, I mean it, not like they’re smart, obviously,” Harry jerks his head towards the doorway the others left through. “I mean, like ... feelings and stuff. You’re very ... I dunno.”

“Intuitive,” Ron says quietly.

“Huh?”

“That’s what Luna says about me,” Ron shrugs and looks up at the dinosaur, his head cocked to one side curiously. “That I sort of just ... get feelings. Y’know?”

“Yeah,” Harry smiles. Ron has always known the best (and the worst) things to say to him at all times. “You’ve always got my feelings.”

“Harry, *everyone* knows what you’re feeling,” Ron grins. “Because you shoot bloody sparks out of your damn fingers.”

“Hmph,” Harry glares at him. “Yeah, but I didn’t always do that and you always ... knew.”

“Yeah, well,” Ron flushes pink. “Someone has to understand you, mate. You’re a fucking wrecking ball otherwise.”

“Rude,” Harry pushes him and Ron shoves him back. They end up tussling, giggling and swearing at one another under their breath until a museum guide coughs loudly and glares at them.

“Shall we go and find the others?” Ron gasps, brushing his fringe away from his head.

“Yeah,” Harry grins and looks up at the diplodocus. “You really think this is a dragon?”

“That one?” Ron stares up at it and shakes his head. “Nah, looks like the Loch Ness monster to me.”

“Good one!” Harry laugh, and then he sees Ron’s expression. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Not telling,” Ron chuckles.

“Come on,” Harry rolls his eyes. “I’ve got an appointment at Gringotts in an hour.”

“*Anzar* Ward,” Griphook smiles, opening the door for Harry. “Thank you for coming.”

“Hey Griphook,” Harry says, flopping into the chair in front of Griphook’s desk. “May your enemies be eaten by dinosaurs.”

“Seems unlikely,” Griphook muses, taking his seat on the other side.

“Okay then, may your enemies be drowned and devoured by the Loch Ness monster.”

“Much more likely,” Griphook smiles.

“Fucking Ron, such a liar,” Harry mutters. “So, do you have my key?”

“I do,” Griphook smiles toothily and pushes a piece of parchment and a key across the desk. “I took the liberty of issuing it to the name you will find on the parchment. Do let me know if I was incorrect in my assumptions.”

Harry reads the parchment. *Named Key Guardian to the heirship vaults of the House of Potter, Black and Prince: Theodore Asger Nott, Lord Nott Apparent.*

“You’re not incorrect,” Harry smiles. “It’s just one key?”

“Yes. It is largely symbolic, Ward. After all, the vaults cannot be opened without your presence.”

“And it’s just the heirship vaults?”

“Key Guardians for Lordship vaults can only be legal adults,” Griphook smiles. “And the Lord Nott Apparent is not a legal adult until November.”

“Seems like a weird rule,” Harry grumbles.

“There is a loophole but it requires underage key guardians to be married to the Lord or Lord Apparent in question,” Griphook raises an eyebrow. “Are you married?”

“No,” Harry blushes.

“I didn’t think so,” Griphook shuffles the papers. “If that changes, *Anzar* Ward, I must make myself very clear. I am your first floo, do you understand?”

“Okay,” Harry says slowly. “Didn’t know you cared that much, Griphook.”

Griphook cackles and grins at Harry.

“You are the Lord Apparent and heir to two very powerful houses and one legendary name,” Griphook says. *And a secret House that guards Mages*, Harry adds in his head. “If someone is proposing marriage they are proposing more than a love match and I would like to be kept informed.”

“Sure,” Harry shrugs. He doesn’t think this is going to be an issue, what with him and Theo only being on their fifth gift and Harry not imagining a universe where he lives to be old enough to get married anyway. “So you do think I’m still the heir of Slytherin? Even though the magic is gone?”

“I do,” Griphook nods smartly. “The Slytherin heirship has always been odd, the Lordship ring has been missing for centuries but we have methods here to assess Lordships and heirship changes and yours has not changed. You are still heir to the House of Slytherin.”

“Cool,” Harry feels hope unfurling inside his chest. *I could still get it back.* “And what about heirships that don’t show up on the inheritance test?”

“There is no such thing,” Griphook says, tenting his fingers. “The test shows all.”

“Look, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, I’m sorry, but is there any chance ... any chance that I could ... be the heir ... to the House of Peverell?” Harry asks hesitantly. It suddenly feels very rude to suggest the goblin test is faulty based on something he literally dreamt up.

But your dreams are truthful, Greenheart.

You mean your dreams, Harry thinks back. I never met Merlin, remember?

Griphook looks at Harry steadily over his hands and sighs heavily.

“It occurs to me, *Anzar* Ward, that it has been a year since we had our first conversation about heirships,” Griphook says quietly.

“Yeah, I mean, yes,” Harry winces. He doesn't like to think about how it felt at the beginning of last summer. Lonely, painful, hungry, and missing Cedric so much his bones ached. *Until Theo*. “A lot has changed.”

“It has,” Griphook nods. “You were a son and heir when you first came and now you have grown. You are the youngest *Anzar*; you are the Ward of my King and the Silver Hall, you are the Lord Potter-Black apparent and, from what I have seen of you in action, you will grow to be magically unparalleled.”

“Okay,” Harry frowns at Griphook. “What’s all that got to do with the House of Peverell?”

Griphook sits back in his chair and sighs.

“The Peverells were Necromancers in the thirteenth century,” Griphook says. “Do you know the implications of that?”

“Yeah, I do,” Harry stares down at his new key trying to hide his anxiety that always mounts when anyone uses the word: *Necromancer*. “The Fell Accords.”

“Indeed,” Griphook nods sternly. “The Peverells broke them. Vigorously.”

“What did they do?”

“Communed with the dead,” Griphook's eyes are sharp with disgust. Harry remembers what Bill said about Goblins hating Necromancers and tries not to shift uncomfortably. “They used their necromantic arts to create rings that could bring back the dead.”

“The Pride of Wixen,” Harry mutters, remembering the phrase from Bill. Griphook smiles tightly.

“Very good, Ward, *Anzar* Weasley has been teaching you well,” Griphook says. “When they were found to have broken the Fell Accords their House was dismantled.”

“Dismantled?” Harry raises his eyebrows. “How do you even -?”

“Their seat was disbarred, their accounts were closed.”

“And the magic?” Harry feels an urgency inside him that he's not sure is entirely his own. *The names, Master*. “Their rings?”

“We no longer held their rings,” Griphook shrugged. “It is believed that they married into other families, took on the mantle of other magics, other rings.”

“Could ...” Harry hesitates. “Could they have married into the Potters?”

“They could,” Griphook nods and looks at him carefully. “It would make no difference, Ward. The seat is disbarred. The House is unnamed. Even if they married into the Potter line, that would still only make you the heir to the House of Potter.”

“What if ... I had the magic?” Harry asks. He thinks of Death’s whispers in his dream-not-dreams. *The names are a good place to start.* “What if ... what if I found it, somehow?”

Though I have no fucking idea how I would even do that.

“Then you would tell no one, Ward,” Griphook leans forward. “Do you read the Italian newspapers?”

“No,” Harry wrinkles his nose. “But my Italian’s a bit shit, to be honest.”

“They are already speculating that you might be a Necromancer,” Griphook’s voice is earnest. Obviously, King Ragnok hasn’t told Griphook about the Obscurus. *He can’t*, Harry remembers queasily. *I compelled him not to tell.* “It is my job, Ward, not only to manage your accounts and guard your finances but to guide you where I can. I have guided the Potters since the late 19th Century. You are not the only heir or Lord to ask this question. My answer is always the same. You are a Potter, not a Peverell. Remember that.”

Harry stares at him. *You are not the only heir or Lord to ask this question.*

“It’s because of the Potter Grimoire, the first names, they’re Peverell names,” Harry stammers. He remembers the first name he took from it. *Hadrian Peverell.* “They’ve asked before because ... The Peverells *became* the Potters, didn’t they?”

Griphook sighs heavily and stares down at the desk.

“Wixen families have always intermingled,” he says quietly. “The Peverells and the Potters, the Peverells and Gryffindors, the Peverells and the Gaunts -,”

“Willow Peverell-Gaunt,” Harry whispers, thinking of the Parseltongue lexicon he found in the Potter vault and gifted to Theo. He feels vaguely sick. “So my ancestors are Tom’s ancestors too?”

“All wixen families are intermingled, do not let it distress you, please, Ward, being related to Lord Gaunt through some distant ancestor gives him no hold upon you or you upon him,” Griphook repeats. “After the Pride of Wixen and Uther Pendragon’s war, the wixen were hunted nearly to extinction, only saved by the intervention of Merlin -,”

“And Morgana and Nimue, yeah,” Harry mutters, rubbing his scar.

“Indeed,” Griphook smiles. “You are well-versed, Ward.”

“Something like that,” Harry mutters. He doesn’t think getting dreams of Merlin from his snake counts as being well-versed. He feels like his head is full of names. *The names, Master.* “So ... after that war everyone had to marry everyone?”

"The pool of viable wixen families was small. Some wixen communities valued the diversity muggle blood brought. Others did not," Griphook says.

"So that's where Purebloods come from," Harry sighs and stares at the ceiling. "And ... the Peverells married into other families to survive once their house was disbanded?"

"Precisely," Griphook's tone is grave. "Necromancy is not a path to be taken lightly, Ward. The cost in this country is most grave. Trust me when I say that with your reputation being as it is currently, you should try to avoid any connection to the Peverells."

"It's not the family," Harry mutters, rubbing his scar. "It's the name, it's the magic ..."

"Excuse me, Ward?"

"It's ... nothing," Harry sighs. He shakes his head and then puts his key in his pocket. "Okay. I guess I should go home."

"We have something else we must discuss, Ward," Griphook says, smiling tightly. "If you would wait here."

Griphook gets up and walks to the door. Harry nods wearily and slumps back in his chair, hands over his face. He doesn't know why the names feel so important, but Death's voice is pressing against him. *The names, Master.*

"I know," Harry groans into his hands. "I fucking know, okay? I hear you."

"Harry?" He turns his head to see Remus in the door with Magnus and King Ragnok. "Who are you talking to?"

"Voices in my head, obviously," Harry scrambles to his feet and bows to the King. Harry catches Magnus' eye and sees a flutter of a wink. "May all of your enemies be trampled by dragons, your Majesty."

"Excellent choice, Ward," King Ragnok nods approvingly before stomping into the room and taking Griphook's seat. "May all of yours be sliced to pieces. Show me the weapon!"

Harry lifts the hem of his jeans to show his new ankle holster and the knife inside. He cannot wait to show it to Theo later. The King of the Goblin grins and nods contentedly.

"What are you guys doing here?" Harry asks, looking between Magnus and Remus. He was expecting to meet Remus at Scrivenshafts so he could take him and Theo home to Spinners End, but he thought Magnus had a meeting in Paris.

"Griphook sent us letters," Remus says and Magnus nods. "Something about the adoption?"

"Yes, there is some paperwork that needs signing before you leave, but that is not the real reason I asked Griphook to call you here. You will have to forgive the subterfuge," the King says, waving his hand towards Griphook who pulls up extra chairs for Remus and Magnus and then stood beside his King.

"Okay," Harry says slowly, lowering himself into his seat and looking at the Goblin King. Magnus nudges him playfully with his boot and Harry remembers some of the stuff Magnus has taught him about etiquette. "How ... can I serve you, your Majesty?"

“We need to talk about the wings,” King Ragnok says, tenting his many ringed fingers.

“Who’s wings?” Harry says blankly, he turns to Magnus. “Do you have wings?”

"I wish," Magnus smirks. "Imagine."

“I mean your wings, Ward,” King Ragnok chuckles.

“I don’t have wings,” Harry frowns. Bizarrely, he checks over his shoulder just to make sure. Magnus laughs and rubs a hand up and down Harry's back, just reassure him.

"No wings," Magnus chortles.

“He means from the Wizengamot,” Remus reaches over to squeeze Harry’s hand. “When you ... well, I don’t know what you did, but when the Black magic ... changed you.”

"Made me look like a giant fucking wierdo," Harry grumbles, glaring down at his Black ring. He swears he can hear the Black Prince's distant laughter.

"It was very impressive," Remus pats Harry's hand.

"Especially to Theodore," Magus mutters, eyes creased with humour.

"Shut up," Harry rolls his eyes. "Do you know why it did that?"

“I’ve not seen it happen before,” Magnus says breezily, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. “But the Black Magic is notoriously shifty.”

“Interesting choice of words,” King Ragnok says, his eyes gleaming as he looks at Harry. “I think you might be a shapeshifter, Ward.”

“Really?” Harry grins. Instantly, he thinks of Theo telling him Loki, the Shapeshifter God, was his favourite story when he was a child. "*Cool.*"

“Don’t tell him that,” Remus closes his eyes wearily. “Please don't tell him that, your Majesty.”

“Do you have something against shapeshifters, Ambassador Lupin?” King Ragnok asks, one bushy pierced eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, do you?” Harry pokes his godfather in the arm. "Kinda hypocritical, Moony."

Remus opens his eyes and glares at Harry.

“I am allowed to be hypocritical, especially when presented with the possibility of an untraceable fifteen-year-old who can shift form into literally anything,” Remus scowls. “I’ve already got grey hairs worrying over keeping track of you.”

“You’ve got grey hairs because you’re *old*.”

“Do you want to be adopted?” Remus demands, with a twinkle in his eye. Harry rolls his eyes and pretends to sulk. Remus has been pretending to use this question to get Harry to do stuff since they started the adoption process. Harry pretends to be annoyed but really he’s happy because the answer is still always yes.

“The reason I called you both here, Steward Black and Ambassador Lupin, is I would like your permission to teach Ward how to shift,” King Ragnok says.

“Our permission?” Remus frowns, his hand resting protectively on Harry’s wrist. “Neither one of us is Harry’s father.”

“But his father cannot be here without suspicion and I am sure that my message shall be taken back to him,” the King leans back on his chair. “So I call on his Steward, who cares for his needs as a Lord and his godfather, soon to be adopted father, who cares for his needs as a child. Will you allow me to teach Ward to use his ability?”

“Do you know what his ability is?” Remus says tautly. Harry understands his concern. *If I can really shapeshift it’s because I’m a Mage and the King can’t know that.*

“I have sat on this throne since the 17th Century, I have seen many Creature shapeshifters, fae and goblin alike,” King Ragnok smiles.

“He’s so old,” Harry whispers to Magnus. “Like you.”

“Piss off,” Magnus whispers back good-naturedly.

“Harry is a wixen, not a Creature,” Remus lies.

“Ward is unusual,” King Ragnok gives Remus a toothy grin. “But he is the Ward of the Silver Hall. We do not offer sanctuary to ordinary Wixen, and I have heard tell from my brothers in other lands of Wixen shapeshifters.”

“It’s not unheard of?” Remus presses and his grip on Harry’s arm is tight. Harry tries not to wince.

“Oh no,” Magnus says breezily. “European Wixen of course only consider Merlin when they think of shapeshifting but that is a purely Eurocentric perspective. The aboriginal communities of North America have many prominent shapeshifters and metamorphs.”

Both Harry and Remus, who have been holding their breath since Magnus said Merlin’s name both breathe out quietly. Magnus is a very, very good liar because he knows so much, often his lies are made up of truth.

“Exactly,” King Ragnok looks at Harry with a particularly eager expression on his face. “I can teach Ward to control his shifting.”

“With no offence meant, your Majesty, but why?” Remus’ voice is still sharp. Harry can smell the woodsmoke of his creature magic, still strong and swirling. He’s still worried and he hasn’t stopped touching Harry’s hand. Harry knows what that means. Remus is thinking about whether or not he needs to make a rapid escape with Harry in tow.

“Goblins work with magic that transforms, Ambassador Lupin. We respect the shifts of nature as rock turns to diamond and air to water. We feel it in our bodies, in our cores. I have lived a long time and have been honoured to train many *Anzars*.” The Goblin King’s eyes rest upon Harry with something like excitement. Harry thinks of all the things a Goblin King could learn in three hundred years. “I have long hoped to train a Shapeshifter. I believe it would have interesting implications for battle.”

“Cool,” Harry’s grin gets wider. “This is going to be *awesome*.”

“Merlin,” Remus groans. “Severus will lose his mind.”

“He said I couldn’t be an illegal animagus he didn’t say I couldn’t be a Shapeshifter,” Harry says, even though that is one hundred percent not true.

“Nice try,” Magnus chortles appreciatively and kicks Harry lightly on the shin. Remus looks like he’s fighting not to laugh.

“I think that would be ignoring the spirit of the law rather than the word of it, Harry,” he smiles.

“Well, I think it’s a good idea,” Magnus says, twisting his Black ring on his finger. “The magic of the House of Black clearly has a form in mind and I think Harry should explore it.”

“That’s all well and good, but Severus -,”

Will absolutely say no, Harry thinks. He needs to act fast.

“Please?” Harry decides to go on the annoying child offensive. “Please please please please -,”

“Harry, this doesn’t work on me,” Remus shakes his head.

“Please please please please please -,”

“Harry, I can’t say yes without talking to -,”

“Please please please please please -,”

“Alright!” Remus pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath. Harry sees Magnus grinning and catches a flicker of a wink from the Goblin King.

“Is ... that a yes?” Harry asks hopefully.

“I will ... discuss it with Severus,” Remus says slowly, “But ... subject to his approval, I think it would be ... fine for Harry to learn from you, your Majesty.”

“Excellent,” King Ragnok claps his hand and rises to his feet with a grin. “I’ll be in touch Ward.”

“Thank you, your Majesty,” Harry grins back and rises to give him a small bow. “May all your coffers overflow.”

“Thank you, Ward,” King Ragnok points at Magnus. “I have words for you, Steward Bane. I have no interest in hearing from the Clave at any time, least of all now.”

“Let’s discuss it, your Majesty,” Magnus jumps to his feet and holds the door open for the King of the goblins. Over his shoulder, he gives Harry a small smile. “See you at home.”

“Now,” Griphook says, thumping a stack of papers down on the desk in front of them. The pile is so tall that Griphook can barely see over it.

“Adoption paperwork?” Remus asks.

“Yes,” Griphook grins.

“You don’t need us to read it, do you?” Harry looks warily at the reams of parchment.

“No, Ward, I need you to sign it,” Griphook cackles. Harry groans.

“Are you sure you want to adopt me?” Harry flops back in his chair.

“It’s always fifty-fifty,” Remus smirks. “Come on, cub. The sooner we start, the sooner we can go home.”

“And tell Severus about the shapeshifting,” Harry leans forward.

“Yes, yes, and give Severus a heart attack,” Remus picks up a quill. “As per usual.”

An hour later with all the paperwork signed, Harry and Remus step out of Gringotts into the August sunshine.

“Where are they?” Remus asks.

“Fortescue’s,” Harry says, nodding down the street. They start walking and Harry tries to ignore the stares, stuffing his mutilated hand into his pocket and pushing the Potter glasses further up his nose. It doesn’t stop the muttering and the stares.

“Jesus, don’t they have anything better to look at?” Harry grumbles to Remus.

“Well, maybe they’re admiring your t-shirt,” Remus smiles. Harry rolls his eyes. Hermione found it in a vintage shop in Covent Garden before they came over to Gringotts. It’s from the Ziggy Stardust tour of 73.

“You don’t think they’re Bowie fans?” Harry jokes.

“I don’t supposed they are used to seeing such an influential Lord apparent walking around Wixen society dressed so very muggle,” Remus says, touching the sleeve of Harry’s t-shirt. “And it is a little big.”

“I don’t care,” Harry mumbles, looking down at the new trainers Remus and Severus bought him. The t-shirt is much too big, probably Dudley-sized, but he saw it and it reminded him of Hermione singing to him last Yule so he doesn’t care.

“You don’t mind wearing things that are too big?” Remus prompts with a smile.

“Used to it,” Harry mumbles. He is, but that’s not the only reason he likes wearing big t-shirts and Theo’s too-big jumpers. He doesn’t want anyone to see his still-protruding ribs or skinny legs. It’s why he keeps wearing Hermione’s hand-me-down trousers despite Blaise constantly threatening to send his tailor to wherever Harry is.

“Whatever makes you feel comfortable,” Remus puts an arm around his shoulder. “But you should know I thought you looked tremendous in your Wizengamot garb as well.”

Harry grins.

“You think I should spend some gold at Madame Malkins, do you?”

“I think I am hardly the person to ask about clothes,” Remus says wryly, and Harry looks fondly at the patches on Remus’ elbows. “My parents were much of the make-do-and-mend philosophy, as were the Shadowman’s. You may have to defer to your friends on matters of fashion.”

Harry smirks like he’s supposed to but he knows what it means. Remus and Severus are not rich. The money they do have, Harry knows is going towards food and keeping the lights running at Spinners End, but probably even more so towards potions ingredients for Harry’s recovery and Remus’ wolfsbane. He also suspects they are both squirrelling away money not for a rainy day but a fucking monsoon. *In case we have to run.* He knows Magnus has been doing the same, organising Harry’s Potter and Black assets so they can still access his money around the world. Preparing to possibly become a fugitive is not only complicated but it’s expensive.

“Wolfsbane...” Harry says quietly. “It has rare ingredients in it, right?”

Remus looks at him sharply but then nods.

“It is the most expensive potion on the planet,” Remus murmurs back, answering the question Harry really wanted to know the answer to, “and yet the Ministry of Magic still refuses to subsidise it. If I did not have ...”

Remus trails off but Harry knows what he means. Without Severus, Remus would either be destitute in order to afford his potion or he would suffer without it and without it, the recovery from the moon each month would make it impossible to work. Without Severus using the Hogwarts stock of ingredients, making up the shortfall with their own money and brewing the wolfsbane for free, Remus would be completely impoverished by his lycanthropy. Harry looks down at his new trainers, the ones he knows Remus and Severus would have had to turn precious galleons into pounds at a horrible exchange rate in order to purchase and feels overwhelmed with sudden gratitude.

“I love my trainers,” Harry blurts out. Remus looks at him curiously with a bemused smile. “They’re ... they’re my favourite birthday present.”

“I’m glad,” Remus squeezes Harry’s shoulder.

“And ... and I like to make-do-and-mend too.” Harry swallows. Remus gives him a puzzled look and then sighs, as if he realises what Harry means.

“You can buy things you like, Harry,” Remus says softly. “I never meant for you to feel like you couldn’t. Just because we don’t ...”

Harry shakes his head and looks down the street with a frown.

“That money can be used for other things,” Harry says quietly, thinking of the adoption process and buying Bill’s Wizengamot seat. *Really good things.* “I’ve got what I need in my Potter heirship vault, Mum and James did a good job with it. And ... I like the stuff I have.” Harry strokes the arm of his new leather jacket. Charlie told him that it’s made from spare dragon hide that they had on the reserve, that the dragon rangers are allowed to take home. Whenever Harry looks at it, he thinks of Charlie spending weeks gathering bits that were the right colour of soft, aged grey. He thinks of Bill taking the pieces to the specialist tailor who makes his dragon-hide boots for work and both of the Weasley brothers paying for the jacket to be made for him with their hard-earned money. How could something from Madame Malkins compare to that? “I like vintage stuff and wearing

Hermione's things and your jumpers and all that. Dudley always gave me crap stuff, y'know? But you all ... you give me really nice things. It feels like sharing, y'know? I never had that before."

Harry's voice is suddenly lost because Remus is pulling him into a practically bone-crushing hug in the middle of Diagon Alley.

"Everything I have is yours, Harry," Remus says fiercely. "Everything."

"Rems," Harry gasps. "Werewolf - strength -,"

"Sorry," Remus softens his grip and rubs Harry's arms with a wry shake of his head. "You triggered a nerve there, cub, but I meant it. We ... are limited in a resources, yes, and we do have to be careful to make sure that we ... aren't caught unawares in a time of crisis, but we ..." Remus takes a big sigh and brushes his reddish blonde curls back from his face. "We will always share."

It's only four words but they hit Harry in the breastbone. He thinks of Remus' cuddly jumpers that he lived in whilst in Skye and of Severus, solemnly handing over a pair of black and green braces on the day of the Wizengamot. *Sharing. Like a family.*

"Yeah," Harry takes a deep breath and grins at his soon-to-be adopted father. "You know, I'll need a name for you. Once the adoption goes through."

"You have at least a dozen names for me," Remus snorts and they begin walking again.

"Well ... what did you call your Dad?" Harry asks.

Remus stumbles because he is staring at Harry, but Harry grabs his arm to steady him.

"*Tad*," he says, his voice slipping into a familiar accent. "It's ... it's Welsh."

"Because your Mum and Dad were Welsh," Harry confirms. Remus nods silently.

"Is it ... *taard*?" Harry tries to pronounce it, stretching the a and the r sound. "Did I say that right?"

Remus' smile is blinding.

"That's really good, Harry," Remus says softly. "Excellent pronunciation."

Harry nods firmly.

"Okay. Maybe I'll call you that."

"Whatever you want, Harry," Remus' voice is light but his grip as he guides Harry out of the way of an oncoming gaggle of Hogwarts students is very firm. Harry completely ignores their stares. He has no idea how he's going to be received at Hogwarts this year and he really doesn't want to think about it. The scent of Remus' creature magic soars around him, smoke and protection.

"So can I rehearse my very very good reasons for why I should be allowed to shapeshift? It's for Shadowman." Harry says as they approach the ice cream parlour. Ron and Hermione seem to be sharing a sundae whilst Astoria and Daphne lick ice cream from cones. Theo, typically, is drinking espresso and reading a book. Harry grins. *Fucking adorable.*

“If I say no, will that stop you?” Remus sighs.

“Nope,” Harry grins as they wave at Theo and the others. “So, it’s really cool magic, goblin magic which is, like, a new branch of magic to be explored -,”

“He won’t fall for that one, Harry,” Remus chuckles.

“Okay, well I never have to learn to be an animagus -,”

“He is vehemently against it anyway,” Remus says.

“If I learn to shift I could come with you on full moons -,”

“And you think *that* is going to improve your case?” Remus laughs. He sits in the last spare chair and promptly orders a scoop of chocolate sorbet and a scoop of treacle ice cream.

“Hey, is that a lizard?” Harry promptly sits down next to Astoria, who is like a mini-Daphne but with slightly more coppery hair, and stares into the box with holes that she has on the table next to the ice cream.

“It’s a leopard gecko,” she stammers, flushing brightly.

“What’s its name?” Harry asks, watching its little tongue flicking with fascination.

“I don’t have one yet,” Astoria whispers. Her magic doesn't smell like ginger, like Daphne's. Instead, it's much less sharp. *Five Spice*, Harry thinks.

“I think it should be called Spot because it's spotty,” Hermione says.

“I think it should be called Níðhöggr,” Theo says, not taking his eyes off his book. “A legendary beast.”

Harry smiles fondly.

“Níðhöggr was a dragon,” Daphne says. “This is a gecko.”

“Close enough,” Theo mutters.

“I like Ben,” Ron says.

“Why?” Daphne asks. Ron shrugs and eats a spoonful of ice cream.

“It’s just a nice name.”

“Hmm, I suppose we could ask it what its name is. Do lizards speak parseltongue, Greengrass?” Harry frowns, looking up at Daphne.

“Why would they?” Ron asks, between a mouthful of cream and banana.

“And how would I know?” Daphne adds, drily.

“I dunno,” Harry shrugs. “You seem like you know stuff, like Hermione.”

“Does he always do this?” Daphne asks Hermione who is eating a cherry. “Treat you like an encyclopaedia?”

“Yes,” Hermione and Theo both say at the same time and Ron snorts with laughter.

“Lizards communicate through signals, Harry, not hissing,” Remus says, tilting his head to look at the leopard gecko as Harry strokes its small head. “So I don’t think you can speak parseltongue to it.”

“But if I could turn into a lizard then I could,” Harry grins at Remus who rolls his eyes.

“Please, Harry, let’s not pretend that you have any real reason aside from wanting to fly again,” Remus says, pushing Harry’s scoop of treacle ice cream across to him when it arrives.

“You’re going to fly again?” Ron splutters.

“I could,” Harry grins slyly at Remus. “If Remus lets me.”

“What’s this?” Theo asks, closing his book (which Harry can see is a book about British Wixen myths) and looking at Harry for the first time since he sat down. Theo frowns and looks him up and down. “You look happy.”

“I am.”

“Suspiciously happy,” Theo narrows his silver eyes. Remus nearly chokes on a spoonful of sorbet. Harry grins at Theo and just knows that this news will make Theo both very annoyed but also, secretly, very excited.

“King Ragnok wants to teach me to shapeshift,” he says. “I’m gonna learn to fly.”

“What?” Hermione coughs.

“YES!” Ron stands up from the table, both hands in the air as if Harry has just won the Quidditch cup. “Actual FLYING!”

“Actual flying,” Harry repeats as Remus sighs and shakes his head.

“Only if you get permission,” he says, gesturing his spoon at Harry in a vaguely threatening way.

“I’ll get it,” Harry grins. He looks at Theo who is staring at him with wide, silver eyes. “Shapeshifting. Like Loki.”

That seems to jerk Theo out of some kind of trance because he looks at Harry and shakes his head, but Harry can see the anticipation behind the mask of his glamour. The familiar glint in his eyes that Harry associates with the first time Theo set eyes on the glamour potion in the Scout hut. Eagerness and determination. It makes Harry’s stomach flutter like he’s swallowed flames, despite the ice cream.

“Well, that sounds like a truly disastrous plan,” Theo says sarcastically, but Harry can see the amusement in the corners of his mouth.

“So, pretty much on brand for you,” Ron adds. Theo snorts with laughter and Ron looks at him in surprise, as if amazed that Theo could ever find anything Ron did funny, but then he grins and sits

back down, returning to his ice cream. He frowns at Hermione. “Hey, you ate all the cherries!”

“We will endeavour to make it as little a disaster as possible,” Remus says, looking around at them all. “To that end, I trust that you will all keep this information to yourselves?”

There is a collection of nods, eye rolls and muttered under breath; “of course we fucking will,” from the group.

“Marauder,” Hermione mutters under her breath. Harry smirks and bites his lip but Remus is undeterred.

“Too right, don’t forget it,” Remus says, fixing his orange eyes on each of them in turn before casually reaches over to steal a scoop of Harry’s ice cream.

“Moony’s scary,” Ron chuckles in a slightly awed voice, licking his spoon.

“What’s a Moony?” Daphne frowns.

“Can you really shapeshift?” Astoria whispers, tugging on Harry’s sleeve.

“Um, maybe,” Harry looks up at Theo and sees the fond expression on his face. “We’ll see.”

“I won’t tell anyone, but it’s ...” Astoria speaks softly, staring up at Harry with wide, amazed eyes. “It’s just *wow*.”

“Yeah,” Harry grins, happily and eats a scoop of his ice cream. It is a sunny day, he has seen dinosaurs and organised his fifth courting gift and might be able to actually fly again. He is with Theo and Remus and his friends and there is ice cream and even a lizard. It is a very good day. “*Wow* is fucking right.”

— — —

Severus is having a very bad day. He watches Draco take the dark mark, sees the way the Dark Lord burns it into his pale forearm with his wand tip and feels nothing at all. *I shall not feel this. This is inevitable. I shall save my pain for the things I can save him from.* As Draco steps to the side, arm trembling, and the Dark Lord moves on to Marcus Flint, Severus steps back beside Narcissa. She is staring at her son with utterly blank eyes.

“Are you well?” Severus murmurs.

“Well enough,” Narcissa’s voice is as sharp as chipped glass. Her eyes follow her son, who is running his fingers over his mark as if he can’t believe it is real. There is look on his face that Severus thinks could be characterised as flushed fear and awe. *Draco, you poor, idiotic fool.*

“We will protect him,” Severus says. He watches as Pansy Parkinson extends her pale arm.

“And the others?” Narcissa whispers.

“They are not ours to protect.”

It is an ironic thing for Severus to say, since after tonight, five of the students in his House and under his protection at Hogwarts will be marked. Narcissa shakes her head, a piece of her blonde hair falling across her face.

“When did we decide children no longer deserve protection?” She says bitterly.

“We only have so much to give, Cissa.” Severus moves his hand to Narcissa’s elbow. He does not care if Parkinson Senior sees and raises his eyebrows. After all, they are widely reported to be having an affair.

“We might be able to give more if he had not forced their hands,” Narcissa whispers. Severus knows she is talking about Harrison.

“You speak of the event at the Ministry.”

“He made them choose.”

Severus stares at her since this outrage is so clearly misdirected and he is amazed she cannot see it. *Or is simply too overcome with grief to think clearly.*

“And who made him choose?” Severus breathes, his eyes flicking to her husband.

“I am not responsible for Lucius’ actions,” Narcissa steps closer to him, their arms linking, so they can speak even lower.

“I did not say you were,” Severus murmurs.

“The child cannot be reckless.” Narcissa breathes. “He is powerful, both politically and literally and he cannot afford to be reckless -,”

“What would you have had him do?” Severus mutters sharply. Narcissa turns her head and glares at him.

“I would have had none of them be there in the first place,” she hisses ferociously.

“Again, who made that decision?” Severus repeats. “It was not the child, to be sure. Come with me.”

Severus pulls Narcissa away from the group of Death Eaters gathering to watch the marking and guides her quickly into the Malfoy library off the main ballroom. Severus closes the door and casts a quick *muffliato*. When he turns, Narcissa has her face turned up towards the ceiling, her hair falling away from her face and down her back like a silver waterfall. There is a stillness around her that Severus recognises from the times in the past when terrible things had happened. *Lucius sleeping with the Greengrass girl at Hogwarts. Bellatrix being arrested. The Dark Lord’s return.*

“You are enraged,” Severus says flatly.

“I am.”

“I understand.”

“You do not,” Narcissa’s words are clipped with rage. “You do not know what it is to have a child who is wanted by the Dark Lord.”

“Do I not?” Severus folds his arms. “To whom do you think he sent Bellatrix’s finger?”

Narcissa stares at him for a moment. Bellatrix has been sporting a bloody stump of a finger for days. The Dark Lord will not allow Severus to help her heal which is good, because Severus would not have been able to force himself to do it.

“He did not,” Narcissa says. Severus nods.

“I understand your fears,” he says quietly. Narcissa lets out a long breath and then presses her hands down on the table, her hair completely hiding her face.

“He is marked,” she whispers. “My baby. His beautiful skin. He marked him.”

Severus moves forward, coming to stand beside Narcissa. He remembers when Draco was born, all that perfect, bouncy baby skin. His hair was so fair it was practically luminous. He allows himself to feel it for a moment, the grief for the godchild he loves, forced down the same past as he was. He takes hold of Narcissa’s hand, gently stroking the small ring with the tiny speck of a black diamond on her finger.

“He did.”

The door opens and Severus waves his wand, quickly breaking his spell. Lucius stands in the doorway. For the occasion, he looks particularly resplendent in green and black but his grey eyes are sharp and full of distrust.

“Narcissa. Severus.” Lucius’ eyes fix upon their joined hands on the table. “Draco is asking for you both. He wishes to ... celebrate.”

“Then we shall,” Narcissa stands, tossing her silvery hair over her shoulder but deliberately squeezing Severus’ hand and then letting her fingers trail across his back as she moves across the room. Severus sees Lucius’ eyes following her every movement and remembers, very vividly, how it had been at the beginning of their relationship - Severus oscillating between them whenever one needed to enact revenge upon the other. As Severus moves to follow her out of the room, Lucius closes the door and stands in front of it. *Here it is*, Severus thinks wearily.

“Lucius,” he arches an eyebrow. “You have need of me?”

“Regularly,” Lucius snaps. “You’ve been absent.”

“I have been present when called.”

“When Narcissa or the Dark Lord calls you. Not me.”

“What do you want, Lucius?” Severus sighs, determinedly avoiding Lucius’ searing gaze. He knows what it means. Lucius takes a direct stare as a challenge, one to be met with sexual advances or curses. “I am not inclined to take another brand to be available to you daily.”

“You could tell me where I could find you if I ever need to.”

“You do not trust me to come when you need me?” Severus demands.

“You stopped coming when I needed you to a long time ago, didn’t you Severus?” Lucius smiles. The scar from Black’s claws twists unflatteringly. Severus has been giving him healing balms and

he knows that Narcissa has been doing the same, but he suspects Lucius does not want the scar to vanish. He has anti-werewolf legislation to pass, after all. "I want you to be more available. I will not ask twice."

Severus has been afraid of this and has felt Lucius circling for a month already. He knows if he does not deal with it now, the next time it will be the Dark Lord.

"I will be at Hogwarts until the start of term. I have preparations to make," Severus keeps his voice steady. He will not give the impression that he is buckling to Lucius' desires. "You can always find me there, Lucius."

It hasn't worked. Lucius' grey eyes flash with victory and he brushes something off Severus' shoulder that isn't there. Severus does not move. Lucius' little power moves are only more wearisome since he became Minister for Magic.

"I shall, dear Severus," he says, smiling as he opens the door and steps out. Severus stands in the doorway and stares at his godson, standing next to Vincent and Gregory, their sleeves pulled up and their faces flushed with fear and relief. They don't understand yet, that the relief is not that they succeeded, the relief is that the Dark Lord did not kill them. Somewhere inside them, Severus is sure a part of them knows that they are not the hunters, as they had hoped. They are as much prey as anyone else. Severus swallows his disappointment. Yet he must smile and comment lightly and then meet with the Dark Lord to discuss potions he wishes to have made. It only involves one *crucio*. Only then, when the night is already wearing away, can he return to Spinners End.

"How many?" Lupin asks, looking up from a book he is reading as Severus walks in the door.

"Seven," Severus shrugs off his Death Eater robes and flops down on the sofa beside him.

"Draco, Goyle, Parkinson ..." Lupin frowns and looks up. "Farley?"

"No. Vincent Crabbe, Marcus Flint, Apollo Mulciber and Felix Rosier."

Severus checks the clock over the mantelpiece. It is quarter to midnight. There is the smell of dinner in the air, a plate of leftover pie left on the countertop in the kitchen, all signs pointing to the elf having cleaned up long ago. Severus sees two mugs left by the sink, evidence that Harrison and Theodore have had their cups of tea before bed. Theodore has been back for a week and Harrison has been happy. Severus has been struggling under the weight of living in a full house again, but tonight, he is grateful. He is grateful for the sign of Bane's many assorted jackets on the coat rack and for the scattered textbooks from Theodore over the coffee table. He is more than grateful for the litter of spread objects around the house that speak of Lupin; a trail of teacups, books with folded pages, cardigans crumpled in balls on the cushions of the sofa.

"Merlin," Lupin closes his eyes tightly. "Aside from Mulciber's heir, I have taught them all."

"And now you may have to kill them," Severus sighs. Lupin raises his eyebrows.

"Well. You're in a dour mood."

"When I am not?" Severus mutters, closing his eyes. Lupin has a small cup of tea on the table and there is a pleasing chamomile and lavender scent rising from the half-empty tea cup. Severus breathes deeply. "How have things been here?"

Severus needs to fill his mind with the quiet domesticity of his home, to know at least that whilst he has been watching children take service to a madman, the children under his immediate care have been safe.

“Fine,” Lupin shrugs casually. “Harry and Theodore have been reading, they went for a walk down by the river -,”

“They shouldn’t leave the garden,” Severus says sharply.

“Magnus was with them,” Remus looks surprised by Severus’ emphasis. “Theodore wore his glamour and Harry wore his cloak.”

“What else?” Severus sighs.

“Very little. There have been letters. The Goblin King thinks Harrison’s shapeshifting lessons should begin whilst he is at Hogwarts, as he can possibly combine it with Bill’s axe lessons -,”

“I am still undecided,” Severus’ voice is sharp. For a week, Harrison has been pleading his case to become a shapeshifter and whilst Severus can think of literally nothing worse he is also struggling to find the words to deny his son something that he so desperately desires - the chance to fly again. “Talk to me of something else.”

“Fine,” Lupin huffs with frustration. “Bane has gone to Paris again, this time for a meeting with Dr Giles -,”

“Sweet Hades below, I have *told* you: Ripper is not to come near my son -,”

“Yes, Severus, being a werewolf I am blessed with an excellent sense memory,” Lupin snaps. “I *know*, and I have no control over who Magnus meets with.”

“Not to come *near* my son,” Severus repeats, practically growling, and Lupin raises his eyebrows.

“What is the matter with you?” He demands softly. Severus sighs and drops his head back on the sofa, his hair falling down the back of it with gravity. He is tired. He does not want to have this conversation, but he must. That is the rhythm of their lives, having conversations they both wish they never had to have.

“I have to leave,” Severus whispers.

He hears Lupin pause, the hand stalling on the page.

“Why?”

“Lucius wants me to be more available,” Severus speaks the words to the ceiling. Notices there is a circle of damp. “I will stay at Hogwarts until term starts.”

There is a long pause. Severus wonders how long the damp has been there. He wonders if there is any point in trying to fix it. After all, in less than a month they will have all left and they will be lucky to return at Yule. They will be lucky to be alive.

“Malfoy wants you to be more available to Voldemort, or to him?” Lupin’s voice is tight, as it always is when he’s holding his rage inside. Severus knows there is no point in lying. He and Lupin have both done unforgivable things to one another, but they no longer lie.

“To him.”

There is an even longer pause and in it, Severus understands this is not going to be an easy conversation. He does not blame Lupin. If the roles were reversed Severus would be murderous.

“I see.”

“Do you?” Severus murmurs.

“Lucius always had you strung along on a thread, it is no surprise this is what he wants now,” Lupin’s voice is taut.

“That is an interesting way of characterising it,” Severus mutters. He still will not open his eyes. There is no reason to see Lupin’s disappointment as well as hear it.

“How else would you call it?”

“Well, I understood we were in a relationship for most of nineteen seventy-nine,” Severus drawls.

“Can you call it a relationship if you’re just brought in to fuck his wife whilst he watches?” Lupin snaps, with uncharacteristic sharpness. Severus feels his own stretched temper fray. He can give grace to a man disturbed by the notion of sharing his lover but he cannot endure Lupin judging him for who he loved before.

“I can call it as I wish, especially since it is in the past unless you want to resurrect all of our past relationships for dissection?” Severus opens his eyes and glares at the wolf. *Motherfucking Sirius Black.*

“Is it in the past?” Lupin’s eyes fix upon him. They glow. Severus will not find it alluring.

“You think I would take to Lucius’ bed now?” Severus demands. “Truly?”

Do you truly think I would leave you now? Lupin looks down at his book, his jaw tight.

“I think you would do anything to protect your cover and I think Malfoy will do anything to control you and I think I would rather know in advance,” Lupin’s voice is too calm. Severus sees that the hand gripping Lupin’s book is holding it a little too tight. Severus will be furious with him if he splits the binding.

“Then I shall be sure to inform you the moment I decide it is necessary to climb into my dearest friends’ husband’s bed, a bed he shares, mind you, with the Dark Lord and Bellatrix Lestrange,” Severus drawls sarcastically.

“That would be kind, thank you,” Lupin snaps the book closed and stands up. Whilst Severus is relieved about the binding of his book, he is quietly devastated and too tired to maintain this fight. *I am fighting a literal war on two sides, I cannot possibly be expected to sustain a lover’s tiff.* Severus sighs heavily and catches Lupin’s hand.

“Remus,” he tugs Lupin’s hand in warning and hears Lupin’s soft growl in response. “I would rather eat treacle tart for every meal for the rest of my miserable life.”

Lupin smiles tightly.

“Perhaps you would develop a sweet tooth.”

“It is unlikely.”

“But not impossible.”

“Hades below, Lupin!” Severus sighs and tips his head back against the sofa. *Fucking Merlin, I need to sleep.* “So I am being scolded for my lack of surety of a future circumstance?”

“I am not scolding, I am just ...” Lupin sighs and closes his eyes before opening them briefly. “When will you go?”

It pulls Severus’ breath out of his chest to say it.

“Tomorrow.”

Lupin’s face doesn’t move. He nods curtly.

“Very well.”

“Lupin,” Severus cannot stop the frustration and he twists Lupin’s hand, firmly. “If you desire to berate me please get on with it, I am *tired*, my knees are killing me and no doubt our child will wake screaming in a nightmare in approximately ninety minutes, so please, proceed *apace*. ”

“I don’t ...” Lupin snatches his hand away and clenches his fists, taking a sharp breath. “I don’t want to be apart, to be here, in your house without you with Harry and Theodore whilst you’re in Scotland with bloody *Malfoy* dropping through your floor -,”

“You are not newly mated, wolf, you can endure a few weeks of separation,” Severus rolls his eyes derisively even as the thought of his lonely dungeon quarters sent a pang of despair through his body.

“When Harry goes back to school I have to go back to Venice,” Lupin says, eyes bleak.

“Then ... we shall proceed as we have been,” Severus says slowly.

“Hiding?” Lupin shakes his head ruefully. Something in Severus’ stomach contracts. They have made no promises, they have only agreed to guide and protect Harrison. That Lupin admitted Severus was and still is his bonded mate means nothing, not from two people who, despite that bond, have been apart for twenty years. *If he does not want me anymore, it is better to know now.*

“You do not wish to continue?” Severus asks. He tries not to feel it, the dull, blunt ache of disappointment. Lupin stares at him and then bends down, pressing his knee against the sofa and gripping the back of Severus’ hair. Severus will not gasp.

“You idiot,” Lupin mutters, eyes luminous. “You absolute imbecile of a man -,”

“This is not flattering, wolf -,”

Lupin’s lips crash against his with a furious strength that is unique to Lupin. He tastes of lavender tea and Severus can’t help the soft sigh inside his chest. It’s the perfect confluence of things, Lupin’s overbearing strength and his soft, floral taste. It is utterly addictive.

“Of course I want to continue, you bloody-minded fool,” Lupin snaps, his nose pressed against Severus’. “But I’m *worried*. If we part now ... I can’t see easily or clearly when we’ll be together like this again.”

Ever.

The unspoken word hangs between them. Severus realises there is absolutely nothing they can do about it. The future is a dark puzzle of what ifs and maybes.

“Well,” Severus swallows heavily. “It is good you are not a Seer, then.”

Lupin snorts and shakes his head, standing up again and offering Severus his hand. His eyes are glowing so softly, tremendously candescent. Severus thinks of everything they remind him of: guttering candles, streetlights in fog.

“Will you come to bed then, *cariad*?” Lupin asks.

Severus knows the context of this. It might be their last night together in this house, in this feeling of home that they have created. There is nothing either of them can do about it, to stop the inevitable dragging separation of war, only hope. Someone once told him that hope was action, not thought, so he takes Lupin’s hand and nods.

“Indeed,” Severus says.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

Go well, friends!

Full Moon

Chapter by [elph13](#)

Chapter Notes

A reminder to everyone that this story is about trauma in nearly every direction. Pay attention to the tags.

This is the last chapter of Part 2 of the story. Please find part 3, the next work in the series m, The Last Necromancer, for the continuation of The Heir to the House of Prince.

Until we meet again! Go well.

(for reference in the chapter f'anwylyd cariad = My dearest love in Welsh).

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

Severus,

I've arranged for our child to go to the Weasley's for the moon. Theodore will go to the Greengrass house. I shall see our child to the Express on Sunday, once the moon wanes. Don't worry, we will take a different mode of transport to the Weasleys to minimize any threats.

Remus

Wolf,

These plans seem sufficient but where is Bane?

S.S.

Severus,

He has to spend some time back in New York to make a report for the Clave. He says he will be back in time to meet us at Kings Cross to say farewell to Harry. Then I believe he will take residence in London to be within easy access to the Ministry. There is some discussion of him moving in with Bill and Tonks. Also, he mentioned something about him suing the Daily Prophet. Any thoughts?

How is Albus? Has Lucius Malfoy called?

Remus

Wolf,

I have no notion of why Bane would be suing the Daily Prophet but I can only wish him well.

I assume that Molly will take the child to Diagon Alley to buy textbooks on Friday. I know the reading list specifies Advanced Spellwork 6 but given his power levels, I think Advanced Spellwork 7 and also Defensive and Offensive Wandless Magic Second Edition. In my spare time (which seems to stretch here alone in the castle) I have been planning a syllabus for the 6th year students that will challenge our child. Can you please ensure the tome is added to the list? Along with these additional texts mentioned in the list below. I am not surprised Bane has found himself a convenient home in London. Or a convenient bed, I should say.

Albus has been suspiciously absent. Lucius has fire called, no doubt to assure himself I have been good to my word, but has not visited. Narcissa has dropped by twice, no doubt to make him jealous.

S.S.

Severus,

This list is enormous and unnecessary. I have selected the books that our child will actually be able to understand (yes, it includes Advanced Spellwork 7 and Defensive and Offensive Wandless Magic Second Edition) and I will make sure he takes it to Diagon Alley. He's also been reading a lot more mythology, I think on the prompting of the Ollivander Heir, with whom he's struck up an odd friendship. I would call it unlikely, but that seems like a cursed word around him. Have you any idea where Albus is? I have asked Bill and Kingsley, and they say he hasn't been in correspondence about the order. Narcissa can make her husband as jealous as she wishes, as long as he is not jealous over you.

Remus

Lupin,

I have not a notion of Albus' whereabouts. I agree, it is best never to tempt fate and suggest that anything around our child is 'unlikely.' Even if Lucius should reveal that I am the object of his jealousy, I can promise you it shall have no effect upon me.

S.S.

Severus,

It had better not.

Remus.

Lupin,

I will send your wolfsbane to Skye. If you do not write every dawn or send the elf to confirm your survival, I shall come myself.

S.S.

- - -

The bed is lonely without you. R.

When next? S.S.

The morning of the last moon. R.

Will you not be tired? S.S.

Not too tired for you, cariad. R.

I shall be there. S.

— — —

Weasley,

We need to talk about his nightmares.

Yours sincerely,

Theodore Nott, Lord Apparent to the House of Nott.

Nott,

You do realise that there are more words in how you sign your name than in the content of the letter? This is how you sign a letter:

Piss off,

Weasley.

Weasley,

Forgive me for presuming you were a mannered being. His nightmares have been much worse since he was taken. He drinks multiple potions a night, usually administered by the adults in our household, and then I soothe him back to sleep. Kreacher will be there to provide the potions but you should know the schedule as well.

Do you want to know the schedule?

Also, fuck you.

Nott.

Nott,

Tell me the schedule.

Also, you suck.

Weasley.

Weasley,

He takes a modified sleep potion when he goes to bed. It has a specific short cycle so that he can retake it after he wakes. This enables him to sleep for roughly two to three hours relatively comfortably. If the potion has too long a cycle he breaks it anyway after around three hours and then he cannot take any other sleep aid, so only use the modified sleep potion. It's the purple bottle. Sometimes he mixes it up with the blue. Kreacher knows this but just keep an eye out. When he wakes, he will either need a pain potion (for his scar) an anti-emetic potion (for vomiting) or be soothed away from self-destructive thoughts. He has a rubber band he snaps on his wrist and he likes to count down from high numbers. He sometimes cannot speak English. The counting helps, just count backwards from a thousand until he can count in English. It hurts him, but it does sometimes help to speak about what he has dreamed of. Sometimes he will not. It helps to ask. He can take no more than three of the sleep potions a night but he rarely wakes more than twice now. The pain potion needs to be administered more carefully. It is a home brew and it is fast acting and potent. Only one sip and no more than five in a night. The antiemetic has no limit but only one or two sips are usually necessary to make nausea subside.

You also suck,

Nott.

Nott,

Are you a healer? You sound like a healer. Can I tell my Mum all of this? Because if he wakes up screaming and shit then she will 100% be coming upstairs and wanting to help. If I don't tell her, there's a chance she'll just put a sticking and silencing charm on me and go about with her own healing methods. She makes all her own balms and shit.

You suck more,

Weasley

Weasley,

I will have the wolf write to your mother was guidance for the potions but I will get him to suggest it is best that she leave all medication in Kreacher's hands, for obvious reasons. He won't tell her about the rubber band and the counting. You should not tell her about the rubber band and the counting. On the off chance he wakes wrapped up in the Black Magic (it's been known to happen) all you can do is wait it out. Without a ring to breach it, all you can do is try and talk to him.

Not possible,

Nott

Nott,

That sounds good. Hermione already told me about the rubber bands and the counting. Don't worry, Mr Slytherin. I've been talking him round from nightmares since I was eleven. Also, just saying, Hedwig likes me better than you.

Up yours,

Weasley.

Weasley,

That may be true, but Sahara likes me best and snake trumps owl.

Up your own,

Nott.

Nott,

Owls eat snakes. So do lions.

Weasley.

— — —

“So the elder wand is just a myth?” Harry asks Theo as they quietly pack on Wednesday night. They have less than a week before they return to Hogwarts and unfortunately, most of it is taken up with the full moon. Remus has already left to go to Skye, trusting Kreacher to make sure both Harry and Theo are out of the house since Remus is so paranoid about transforming early (even though Theo says it is literally impossible) that he goes to Skye hours before the moon rises. Theo’s going back to the Greengrass House with Sahara and Harry and Kreacher are going to the Burrow. Hedwig has already flown there. Harry is oddly nervous. This will be the first time he’s been sleeping somewhere where he doesn’t have Theo, Remus or Severus nearby since he was kidnapped, but he knows Ron and Theo have been writing letters (and exchanging insults about it) all week. He knows it will be fine. Still, a note arrived this morning in a familiar slanted spidery scrawl.

If you have need of it, my personal floo is open to you. The password is Aconite. Also, you bear my stone for a reason. If danger comes, do not hesitate. S.S.

Harry knows it will be fine.

“I’m not using that word. Myths tend to come to life around you,” Theo says, folding his robes into his trunk. He shoots Harry a fond look. “It’s a Harry fucking Potter thing.”

“Rude,” Harry mutters.

“Are you going to explain why Ollivander has got you so interested?” Theo asks, sitting down on their bed. Sahara is curled up in Harry’s trunk, already protesting their four-day separation.

“Well, at the Wizengamot she explained why my wand is being weird and it’s because it’s not the right wand for me anymore.”

“Not the right wand?” Theo frowns. “Because of your change in power? So you need a new one?”

“She said no,” Harry shrugs and tosses Theo one of his books which is found its way into Harry’s trunk. “She said the right wand would find me and then she started sending me letters telling me to research the elder wand.”

Harry bends down on his hands and knees to pull a pair of pyjama trousers out from under the bed. He is confronted by a bulbous pair of yellow eyes, staring up at him.

“Jesus!” Harry scrambles back, his heart racing. “What the fuck are you doing, Kreacher?”

“None of Master’s business,” Kreacher snarls, but Harry bends back down to look closer and sees that Kreacher has a floorboard open under the bed.

“Are those my crunchie bars?” Harry demands. “I bought them from the shop for Ron especially, you thief!”

“Master is cruel, Master never buys crunchie bars for Kreacher,” the elf says, rapidly stuffing the chocolate bars into a little bag.

“Yeah, because when I buy you sweets you tell me it's a gift and it's insulting!”

“Master is an ignoble brat!” Kreacher points a crunchie bar at him. “If Master does not go away Kreacher will not give a crunchie bar to the Weasel and will eat every single one!”

“Fine! Keep the fucking things,” Harry huffs, sitting back on the floorboards and looking up at Theo. “He stole my crunchie bars.”

“If that were in any way revelatory I would make an effort to appear shocked,” Theo says drily. A piece of soft hair falls in front of his face as he shakes his head. “This thing with Ollivander doesn't make sense, Harry.”

Harry stares at Theo's long, careful fingers as he tucks the piece of hair behind his ear. *Potioneers hands*. He thinks vaguely of how those fingers feel in other places and then shakes his head. *Packing, Potter!* He scolds himself internally and scoops up a pile of clean t-shirts to dump in his trunk.

“Why?” he says, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Theo looks a little smug.

“Because the elder wand isn't just one myth, it's many,” Theo counts off on his fingers and Harry looks away, almost sure that Theo is putting this on deliberately. *Sneaky Slytherin bastard*. “It's the deathstick, the wand of destiny, the start of the bloody trail -,”

“So it's got lots of names, like me,” Harry says with a shrug.

“No, it's not a lot of names, I need a better comparison.” Theo presses his fingers against his lips and Harry is actually getting a bit annoyed now, because he can't work out if he wants to tell Theo to stop doing things with his fingers or if he wants to tell Theo to start doing lots of *other* things with his fingers. “It's like ... okay, it's Excalibur.”

Harry stares, completely distracted by Theo's words. He remembers the voice of Excalibur inside his dreams when it whispered to Merlin. *I am the giver, I am Oldest and Deepest, I give power*.

“How is it like Excalibur?” He asks, slowly rolling one of the therapy stress balls Remus got him from one hand to the other.

“It's a magical object that's been lost or maybe never existed,” Theo shrugs, neatly folding his jumpers into his trunk. Harry spies the dark blue cashmere one and nicks it, throwing it into his own trunk as Theo smirks. “Some historians think Excalibur was a metaphor for a powerful wand, that it was called a sword but really it was the first conduit.”

“That's not right,” Harry mutters, rubbing his forehead, remembering his dream. *Morgana, rolling her eyes at Merlin derisively when he shoots magic out of his hands and not a wand*. “Morgana had a wand before Nimue brought Excalibur to them.”

“How do you know that?” Theo frowns.

“Dreamt it,” Harry says absently, staring at Sahara. *Or she dreamt it.*

We dream many things, Greenheart.

Yeah, but only one of us dreams of people we couldn't have possibly ever known.

“So you think it might not actually be a wand?” Harry asks Theo. “It could be a sword?”

“No, I mean, yes, I suppose it could be, but it might also be that it doesn't exist,” Theo sighs, closing the lid of his trunk and sitting back against the bedframe, pulling one knee up towards his chest. “It's just a rumour down the years, a metaphor for how power corrupts. Like ... like a fable. Like the Golden Fleece or ... the holy grail.”

“Good movie,” Harry mutters, looking around for his Bowie t-shirt. “Or it could be real. It could be out there.”

“Yes, but you realise there's a version of the death stick in almost every culture?” Theo is already pulling up his latest book, *Ancient wixen artefacts and their symbology*. He taps the front cover of it significantly. “It could be anywhere in the world and it's not like we can go off on a hunt for your perfect wand.”

“You don't fancy that?” Harry grins, reaching for a pile of fresh laundry to dump on top of his t-shirts. Kreacher appears from under the bed and growls, muttering about ‘slovenly brat’ and starts to organise the chaos Harry's made in his trunk. “We could pack all of this in, just travel around the world looking for cool wands stories?”

Kreacher slaps his hand away from the trunk and charms a book to hover over Harry's head threateningly.

“Master is bad packer,” Kreacher growls. “Master stays away.”

“You make it sound so romantic,” Theo says drily. “Almost as if you've forgotten the hoard of Death Eaters who would be chasing us and the imminent threat of death.”

“Look, if stuff can't be romantic and involve an imminent threat of death, you are courting the wrong person,” Harry says flatly, throwing socks from his drawer towards the trunk. Kreacher catches them in quick succession. Theo's makes a strange, almost strangled sound. Harry frowns at him. “What?”

“You said courting,” Theo says quietly, his eyes fixed on Harry's necklace which is hanging outside of his t-shirt. “You've never said the word before.”

“Sure I have,” Harry grins. He kneels on the bed and taps Theo's own necklace, the golden pendant sitting against his grey t-shirt. “Just never out loud. Or to your face.”

“So just in your head,” Theo grins back.

“Hey, my head is a busy place these days,” Harry shrugs. “Sahara and Death and the Black Prince are very supportive.”

“Good to know we have the encouragement of a dead Dark Lord and Hel of Niflheim,” Theo mutters.

“You really think he was a Dark Lord?” Harry asks curiously.

“I think he’s in the edited collection of *British Dark Lords through the Ages*,” Theo shrugs.

“If the book fits, is it?” Harry snorts.

“Something like that,” Theo smiles and, very quickly, reaches up and grabs Harry’s neck, pulling him down for a kiss. Harry makes a surprised, sort of strangled sound, but very quickly adjusts and starts to think that maybe he’s missed a trick, mentioning courting, since Theo is so enthusiastic, before a book lands on his head.

“Fucking *OW*, Kreacher,” Harry rubs his head and glares at the elf.

“Master will have decorum according to his rank and House,” Kreacher snarls. “Will not behave like a doxy in front of Kreacher.”

“A doxy -? Wait, are you calling me *slutty*?”

Just then, before Kreacher can answer or the book can be lifted to fall on Harry’s head again, Harry feels a jingling sound under his skin, like a vibration. His head jerks up and he sniffs the air. There’s something there, he just can’t catch it. Kreacher growls and jumps off the bed.

“Wards,” Kreacher snarls, whipping a small bottle of pepper spray out of his apron and popping away.

“Someone’s here,” Theo flips out his knife and scrambles for his wand. “No one’s supposed to be here.”

“Shit,” Harry says. He starts running down the stairs, heart racing, with Theo on his heels in time to see Kreacher standing in the open doorway, silhouetted in the rising moon.

“You shall not come in!” Kreacher’s bullfrog voice booms. “Kreacher guards the children!”

White light bursts out of Kreacher’s skin, covering the doorway in a film of magic just as Harry had done in the bathroom of Grimmauld Place last year.

“Who is it?” Harry rushes forward and gasps. Slumped on his knees on the garden path is Dumbledore. “Fuck! Put the shield down!”

“No, don’t!” Theo shouts, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “It could be an imposter.”

“Severus,” the man on the garden path gasps. It certainly looks like Dumbledore but then Barty Crouch Jr looked like Mad-eye.

“Theo, he looks like he’s dying -,” Harry says.

“I don’t care,” Theo’s eyes are sharp.

“Well, I do,” Harry says urgently. “How’s it going to look if Albus fucking Dumbledore dies on Severus Snape’s doorstep? This will be really bad for us, for everyone! He’s the only one stopping Voldemort from being in complete control of this shit show!”

Harry feels sparks gathering in his fingertips and he can't stop it because the very last thing they need right now is dead Dumbledore. *We'd have to run.* If they run then Severus won't run with them, Harry just knows it, the way he's seen Remus and Severus do this dance for months now. One of them is always preparing to flee with Harry, to take him somewhere safe whilst the other is preparing to stay and fight. Severus will be the one who stays and spies and fights. Harry can't let that happen. Maybe it's inevitable but he can't let it happen yet. *I'm not ready to run. I'm not ready to leave Severus behind.*

"Alright, Harry, alright!" Theo has closed his hands over Harry's fists. "Just ... you need to know it's him first! Ask him - ask him something only he would know."

"Um okay," Harry swallows hard and stares at Dumbledore, who is mostly shadowed but in the shaft of moonlight, Harry can see his hand looks like it has been stuck into a volcano. "Sir? Sir, what was the flavour of Bertie botts that you ate that day in the hospital wing? After Quirrell and everything?"

Dumbledore lifts his head. His face is contorted with pain, the deep lines in the skin twisted.

"Earwax," he croaks out.

"That's him," Harry says.

"One more," Kreacher snaps.

"What? Oh, okay, um ..." Harry hates this, remembering all of the private conversations he has had with this man who he once loved as dearly as anyone else he loved. "What did the sorting hat tell me? I told you in my second year, the exact words, what did the sorting hat say to me?"

"You would do well in Slytherin," there is a twisted smile on Dumbledore's lips. "Harry."

Even through the veil of the black magic, he feels the brush of Dumbledore's legilimency gently pulling the memory to the front of his mind.

"Listen to me, Harry," Dumbledore's voice is calm and precise and utterly comforting. "You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own rare gift, Parseltongue - resourcefulness - determination - a certain disregard for rules ..."

Harry swallows hard and places a hand on Kreacher's head.

"Guard Theo," he says and then looks at Theo. "Put your mind shield up."

"Why?" Theo's quick eyes dart between Harry and Dumbledore. "What did he do?"

"I'm going to get him now," Harry doesn't answer. "I need you to go and call Severus through the floo, the password is Aconite. Okay? Go!"

Theo looks very annoyed but turns and runs to the fireplace with Kreacher switching his black shield from the doorway to Theo. Harry belts down the garden path and lands on his knees in front of Dumbledore. As soon as he arrives, Dumbledore slumps forward, his head against Harry's shoulder.

"It's okay," Harry finds himself saying, though he doesn't know why. "You're - you're safe."

“Of course,” Dumbledore’s voice is mumbled. Harry realises with the man pressed against him just how thin he really is. It’s odd because Harry always imagines him to be as sturdy as a tree. “I am with you.”

Harry doesn’t know why this all feels so fucking terrible. Why his whole body is trembling and he finds himself wanting to scream. The stars are bright above him, just like they were when Harry appeared outside the maze with Cedric in his arms. When Dumbledore held him, crushed against his chest with surprising strength, as Amos wailed. That strength is gone and Harry finds himself wishing it back.

“Don’t die,” Harry mutters urgently. “You can’t die now, we’re not ready, I’m not ready yet -,”

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice is slurring and he falls sideways onto the grass. Harry rushes to move so his white head is cushioned by Harry’s lap. “My dear boy ... I am sorry ...”

“No, no, don’t be sorry you wanker,” Harry whispers, hands shaking as he strokes Dumbledore’s silver hair. His magic doesn’t smell like lemons anymore. Now it smells like something else, something sticky and gluey that reminds Harry of the poison Lucius Malfoy pumped into his veins. Harry stares down at the burned, blistered hand and sees an odd ring there, one he is sure Dumbledore has never worn before.

“It sings of death,” Sahara hisses and Harry is not surprised to see her coiling behind Dumbledore’s head.

“He can’t die yet,” Harry hisses back. *“I can’t fight Tom on my own.”*

“The hallows, Harry -,” Dumbledore whispers.

“Shhh,” Harry swallows back bile just looking at the rotted, burned flesh. “It’s - it’s poisoning you, right? I’m just ... I’m going to take it off.”

Harry reaches for the black stone ring. He winces when he pinches the heavy gold band with the black stone set in it, a strange triangle carved into it and a split down the middle. It is stuck to the bone. Dumbledore groans as Harry slowly, grimacing, pulls the ring along his finger towards the blackened nail.

“You’re going to be fine, you’re going to live, it’s going to be fine,” Harry chants, more to himself than anyone else.

“HARRISON, NO! DO NOT TOUCH IT!” A voice bellows at him. Harry jumps, twisting to see Severus swooping towards him, eyes fierce, but the jolting movement has pulled the ring away from Dumbledore’s hand and it lands, neatly, in Harry’s palm as if was always meant to be there.

Two things happen.

First, Harry is thrown backwards from Dumbledore, lying on his back and staring up at the wide stars, feeling as if he’s been hit in the chest with twenty bludgers, stuttering for breath as green magic, vibrant, joyous, sparkling green magic rises from his skin like steam.

I know you, Harry thinks distantly and a hissing erupts from all around him, the magic coming off his skin twisting and reforming and bending itself into the form of a great green basilisk, delightfully familiar. *The Slytherin Magic.*

“Where the fuck have you been?” Harry hisses at it, through joyful tears. The magic twists again and looks at Harry with gleaming eyes then, suddenly, it takes a violent dive into Harry’s chest and he thinks he might stop breathing. That’s when the second thing happens.

Time stops. Or at least, it stops for Harry. Or maybe he goes to another place where time stops. Death is there, riding a thestral made of silver magic.

“Master,” Death says. “You have found another part of yourself.”

Harry is no longer on the grass and looking at the stars. He is in the dream-not-dream where the two points of the triangle smoke and one burns. Except now it is different. Two points of the triangle are burning. He stares down at his hands. The Black ring is still there, it is always there, as is his Prince ring but the new ring sits on the first finger of his right hand, the black stone glowing with a silver light. The thestral trots over and presses its nose against Harry’s new ring.

“I don’t understand,” Harry whispers.

“An ancient magic. Yours.”

“It’s the Slytherin magic but its ... its not just the Slytherin magic, is it?”

“The first name you chose, Master,” Death says.

Hadrian Peverell. Harry strokes the thestral’s bony cheek, the ring glowing. He listens as they sing the same, mournful song. It reminds him of something else, of cold stars, of the quiet in the garden, maybe even, of the invisibility cloak.

“Willow Peverell-Gaunt,” Harry breathes. He runs a thumb under the eye bone of the thestral. “The wixen families intermingled. The Slytherin family and the Peverell family.”

“Lord Slytherin,” Death places a long-fingered hand on Harry’s head. “Peverell heir.”

“There’s no Peverell heir. The house was dismantled. There’s no Peverell Lord,” Harry whispers.

“No,” Death says. “There is you, Master.”

Harry stares at her and then looks at the burning points of the triangle and remembers what Griphook told him: *The cost in this country is grave. You should try to avoid any connection to the Peverells.*

“I can’t tell anyone,” he whispers. “Can I?”

Death presses cold fingers to his cheek.

“All things in their time,” she says.

“Harry! Harry wake up!” Harry jerks up with a sharp breath, immediately feeling strong arms grabbing him. He can taste treacle and fierce thunderstorms. *Theo.* He can see nothing and his scar feels really nasty. Not the normal levels of pain, like it’s been plugged into a supercharger of pain,

like when two powerful electric things combine and burst a circuit and now, instead of stars and moonlight and Theo, all Harry can see is darkness.

“Theo,” Harry chokes. *“My scar. I can’t see anything.”*

“Sir, he can’t see anything!” Theo is calling. “He’s in pain, his scar!”

“A pain draught, green vial,” Severus’ clipped tones float through the air. Harry can smell his magic as if someone is burning sage right next to him. “Head pain can inhibit vision.”

Harry feels glass pressed against his lips.

“Drink, Harry,” Theo says firmly.

“What if ... it has willowbark in it?” Harry croaks.

“You think this is fucking funny?” Theo’s voice is shaking but Harry can perfectly imagine his expression. Furrowed brows, lips drawn into a firm line. He swallows obediently, tasting lemons. “You touched a cursed object, you complete moron!”

“Does he show any symptoms?” Severus’ voice calls. “Any burning or mottling of the skin?”

Harry feels Theo checking his hand.

“No,” Theo calls back. “He ... he seems fine and he’s ... wearing the ring.”

The pain in his head is already receding and he blinks. He can see the pinpoints of stars emerging. He can feel something sparkling through his blood and grins.

You are more yourself, Greenheart, Sahara slithers onto his chest. She is vibrant and glittering, her eyes black pits of starlight.

“You are more yourself too,” Harry hisses back. He hesitantly lifts his right hand towards her and in a dance of green sparks, she is wrapped around his arm, just like she used to. Harry lets out a desperate sob of delight. He looks at the green sparks around him. *You’re back. I missed you so fucking much.*

“Harry,” Theo frowns and keeps turning Harry’s hand over. “Are you in pain? Why are you crying?”

“The Slytherin magic,” Harry hisses to Theo. *“It’s in the ring, it’s back.”*

Theo’s eyes widen and then he takes a deep breath, pressing his hand over Harry’s beating heart.

“You’re okay,” Theo whispers softly. “Does anything hurt?”

Harry shakes his head slowly but winces as he does because his head does feel like he’s been kicked by a thestral.

“Try and get him to sit up,” Severus’ voice is taut with worry and Harry knows he’ll feel better if Harry’s upright and Severus can see him. Harry takes a deep breath and lets Theo pull him up. Dazedly, he looks across the grass and sees Severus kneeling beside Dumbledore. He is breathing

shallowly, but his blue eyes are sharp and open. Harry immediately squeezes Theo's hand and thinks, very firmly through the bond: *mind shield*. Theo nods and looks down at the grass.

"You look well, Harry," Dumbledore croaks. His eyes fix on the ring on Harry's hand. "But I think it would be best if you return my ring."

"It's not yours," Harry says without thinking. Severus glares at him and then looks pointedly at Sahara who is practically glittering. Severus has worked it out, he knows the Slytherin magic is back and if Harry isn't careful, Dumbledore will too. *I don't want Dumbledore to know this*. Harry takes a deep breath. "Sorry, sir, I ... I don't think I can take it off."

Harry offers his hand to Theo. Theo frowns but when he tries to pull the ring off, Harry sees Death's hand descend, unseen, and press the ring in place.

None shall move it now, Master.

"It could be part of the curse," Severus says.

"Allow me," Dumbledore rasps out, lifting his wand. Theo's arm clenches on Harry's but Harry doesn't care. He's staring over Dumbledore's shoulder. Death is hovering there. Harry takes a deep breath in. Dumbledore's magic hasn't started smelling lemony again. It's tainted now with something that smells almost like a petrol fire. *The poison*. Harry thinks. *He's dying*.

"Absolutely not," Severus snaps. He stands up and grabs Harry's forearm, wrenching him to his feet and glaring at Kreacher. He gestures to Dumbledore, who has slumped sideways against the bench now that Severus is not holding him up. "Keep him alive and don't let him move. Theodore! Follow!"

Theo's at Harry's side instantly and they are hustled into the living room. Severus abruptly pulls floo powder off the mantelpiece and throws it into the fire.

"You're going to the Greengrass house," Severus says shortly to Theo. "This instant. Say goodbye."

"I'm not leaving Harry like this," Theo's voice is equally as short, his fingers tangled with Harry's tightly.

"We are in dangerous waters," Severus lowers his voice and looks at them both intently, obsidian black eyes dark. "He looks incapacitated but he is not. He is a danger to you both and I must heal him so I cannot waste time."

"Our stuff -," Theo protests. Harry looks down at Sahara on his arm. She's sliding slowly along his skin and he sees stars jumping from scales to flesh.

"The elf will bring it all," Severus cuts Theo off. "It is not up for debate, Mr Nott. You will go to the Greengrass household and Harrison to the Weasleys and I will attempt to save that man's life. Now go."

Theo looks at Harry desperately, as if hoping Harry will stop it from happening but Harry can feel the coiled panic in Severus' magic. The whispers are wrapping close between them, as if the Prince magic inside Severus' ring is trying to bind him up in shadows so he can't be seen or found.

Severus is right, he has to save Dumbledore and he will do it much better if he knows Harry and Theo are safe.

"It's fine," Harry whispers. He holds out his arm to Theo so Sahara can slither onto his wrist. "You've got your journal, right?"

Theo nods stiffly. Sahara moves and for a second, joins their arms with her scales, Harry feels Theo's thoughts press against him.

Will you tell me what happened?

Harry can feel the anxiety that floats with those words. Theo is terrified that Harry is going to drift away again. Harry smiles and thinks something very hard.

Everything, Nott.

Theo smiles and leans forward to peck Harry chastely on the cheek, jumping back in surprise when a slight jolt of electricity jumps from Harry's skin onto his lips.

"Sorry," Harry grins nervously. "It's back."

"Yes it is," Theo smiles and stares at Harry's lips for a second. Harry knows he is thinking about how, before the Slytherin magic left, sometimes when Harry kissed Theo there were sparks on his tongue. Then Theo has turned and stepped into the fireplace. "The House of Greengrass, Grosvenor Square!"

Harry and Severus watch him disappear.

"It's the Slytherin magic?" Severus asks abruptly.

"Yeah," Harry looks down at the ring on his finger. "I think Dumbledore took all of the curse."

"It seems like that but it was still abominably foolish," Severus' voice is quiet with rage.

"I know," Harry swallows and forces himself to look into Severus' eyes. "I'm sorry."

Severus stares at him for a long moment and then nods, almost imperceptively and Harry knows he's forgiven.

"Now," Severus jerks his head towards the floo. "Your turn."

Harry steps forward and hesitates, turning to look at his Sire.

"You won't be able to save him," he says quietly. Through the front door, he can still see the shadow of death that hovers over Dumbledore. "Not forever."

"No one can stop death forever," Severus says slowly, one dark eyebrow raised. "But ... no, I do not think that will be my goal here. I can only contain the curse, not halt it."

"How long?" Harry asks.

"A year at most," Severus shrugs. He doesn't look particularly sad. Harry feels a pit of anxiety settle in his stomach.

“Will we be ready by then?” Harry whispers. He knows he doesn’t need more words. *Will we be ready to flee if we have to or to fight if we need to?* “I mean, do we have a plan?”

“Albus probably has one,” Severus says evenly. “Not that he is likely to share it.”

“He wants to teach me,” Harry thinks of Dumbledore’s urgency. Severus nods gently and Harry knows that they will have to hope Dumbledore lives a year so Harry can work out Dumbledore’s plan in their lessons together. Harry nods.

“I can do that,” he mutters, as if Severus has asked him. “I’m good at secrets.”

There is something fiercely proud in Severus’ eyes for a second and then it is gone, he steps forward and lowers his voice.

“How did you know?” Severus asks quietly. “That he will likely not survive it?”

“His magic tastes different,” Harry shrugs, looking at Dumbledore who seems to have fallen asleep, Kreacher holding a kitchen knife over him. “And ... well. She’s around.”

“She...?” Severus queries softly. Harry holds his gaze for a long moment.

“She,” he says, flatly. Realisation dawns quietly in Severus’ eyes. He puts a hand on Harry’s shoulder and turns him gently toward the floo. Severus puts a handful of powder in the fire.

“Go,” he says quietly. “I must halt her, if I can.”

Harry swallows. He has not seen his Sire in nearly two weeks. He never thought he would miss his presence; quiet, stoic, herb-smelling and constant. He tries to think of something to say.

“Go well,” he says, remembering what Blaise says to his Mum and Theo when he says goodbye. Severus smiles, or as much as Severus ever smiles, which is a slight softening of the muscles around his mouth.

“Go well, *farzandam*,” he murmurs. Harry tightens the tethers around their wrists for a moment and then steps into the floo.

“The Burrow!” He yells. The last thing he sees before the green flames whisk him away are Severus’ obsidian eyes, watching him disappear.

“Harry!” Ron says as he stumbles out of the floo. “You okay? Where’s your stuff?”

“Kreacher will bring it,” Harry coughs on floo smoke.

“Are you alright, Harry darling?” Mrs Weasley is sitting at the kitchen table amongst reams of wool, clearly in the middle of some pre-term knitting.

“I’m fine,” Harry lies and grips Ron’s hand. “Can we - can we go outside?”

“Yeah,” Ron frowns hard but walks Harry out of the kitchen door.

“Wait, take a brew with you, lads,” Mrs Weasley gestures at the teapot with her wand and tea pours into two mugs. “The honey is on the side, Ron.”

Ron nods and reaches for the glass bottle of milk on the side, pouring it into one cup for him and drizzling honey into Harry’s cup without milk. Harry picks up the mug, one of the Weasleys’ own clay creations with ‘Ginerva’ scratched onto the side. Still holding Ron’s hand, they walk outside.

“Sit down,” Ron says quickly, guiding Harry to the old log that’s been carved into a bench under the willow tree. “Your pulse is really fucking high.”

“You’re checking my pulse?” Harry says, amused as Ron forces him to sit and then sits next to him.

“Yeah, Nott told me it’s a good idea,” Ron sips his tea and looks at Harry critically. “Drink your tea, mate.”

Harry snorts and obeys. The tea is sharp, the honey is sweet. It is warm enough and just what Harry needs. He takes a deep breath and starts to explain everything to Ron. He listens, quietly, sipping his tea, eyes widening steadily as he stares at Harry’s hand.

“So this ... this is the Slytherin Lordship ring, maybe?” He whispers.

“I guess it could be,” Harry turns his hand. He wonders if he is going to be able to disguise it, if it will hide away as the Prince ring does and the Slytherin heirship ring used to. He looks down and hisses to it: “*conceal*.” Ron gasps as the ring folds itself into invisibility but it doesn’t do it exactly the same way the Slytherin ring used to. The Slytherin ring used to hiss and almost fizz away, a light buzzing in Harry’s ear to remind him it was still there. This ring is quiet. Not silent, like the Prince ring, but very quiet. It reminds Harry of the invisibility cloak. *Slytherin magic in a Peverell ring, then.*

“And Dumbledore, he’s just ... he’s going to die?” Ron stares at Harry.

“Severus thinks he’ll have a year,” Harry says.

“Blimey,” Ron shakes his head. “We’d better get fucking organised, hadn’t we?”

Harry snorts with laughter because Ron just gets it.

“Something like that,” he says. Harry looks out towards the woods and frowns. Something is moving and instantly, his fingers itch with magic. “What’s that?”

“That’s Luna. Their house is on the other side of the woods. She’s looking for Moon Frogs.”

“What are moon frogs?”

“Who the fuck even knows?” Ron shakes his head fondly. Harry sees Luna raise her hand to them. In the moonlight, Luna glows from the tip of her silver head to her bright, yellow wellington boots. Harry grins. Something inside him needs to talk to Luna.

“Can we go and hang out?” Harry asks, taking another sip of his tea.

“Reckon so,” Ron glugs his tea down, crosses to the kitchen door and sticks his head in. “Mum, we’re going to see Luna, okay?”

“No more than an hour,” Mrs Weasley says. “I’ll watch the clock.”

“Okay.”

“What does that mean?” Harry asks as he sits his mug down on the bench and walks with Ron through the long grass of the field. “Watch the clock?”

“She ... doesn’t want to look at the clock anymore so she only watches it when me or Ginny are out at night with Luna,” Ron sighs. “Dad’s hand on the clock ...”

Harry swallows heavily. He doesn’t want to ask but he does.

“Mortal peril?”

Ron shakes his head.

“Home,” he says quietly. “It’s better than it being on Lost or something but I think she ... she sometimes sees it and thinks ...”

Harry’s stomach jerks. He can imagine Mrs Weasley looking up from her knitting, seeing Arthur’s face on the spoon-shaped clock-hand set comfortably where it should be, resting at home, can imagine the smile drawing across her face only to fall, suddenly, when she realises the truth. *Molly, first and last.*

“Hello, Harry of Merlin,” Luna says softly when they reach her. “You have two of three, now.”

Harry instantly thinks of the two flames in Death’s triangle and shakes his head, because of course Luna knows. Harry doesn’t even know which two of three he has, what even the three would be, but he knows something is different now.

“Yeah,” Harry nods. “Maybe.”

“I’m not even gonna ask,” Ron takes Luna’s hand, looking down at the toadstool circle she is sprinkling oil on. “How’s it going with the Moon Frogs?”

“They haven’t emerged yet.”

“Hmm, lazy dicks. This oil smells nice,” Ron sniffs the air. “Is it garlic?”

“Yes, Moon Frogs like garlic and mushrooms,” Luna says serenely.

“They sound like Charlie,” Ron grins at Harry. There is the sound of a twig snapping behind them and Harry spins, lifting his right hand.

“*Protect,*” he hisses, and the Slytherin magic, which has been dancing through his veins desperate to show form and to dazzle, explodes from his hand hissing and whirling into a glittering green shield.

“Oh yeah,” Ron mutters. “It’s definitely back.”

“Ah,” Luna sounds pleased. “It found its way back to you, Harry of Merlin!”

“Harry of Merlin, an interesting title,” a familiar voice calls out. Harry stares through the shield and watches as Marina Ollivander steps out of the trees, a basket in her arms, full of wood.

“Oh,” Ron sighs in relief. “Hi, Miss Ollivander.”

“This isn’t weird?” Harry mutters to Ron.

“No, her property backs onto Luna’s,” Ron mumbles and Harry wonders how many Wixen families hold land around the Weasleys. Ron nods to Marina’s basket. “Are you gathering?”

“I am Mr Weasley, the full moon is an excellent time to cull Ash. It works beautifully with dragon heartstring, the moonlight softens the fire,” she says. Her eyes drift to Luna. “Greetings, fae child.”

Harry and Ron stiffen.

“How do you know that about her?” Harry asks sharply. Ron seems to hold Luna’s hand a little tighter.

“Her wand,” Marina says simply. “Fortingall Yew. The oldest tree in Britain.”

“So?” Ron says. Marina smiles gently.

“Fae are made of Elements Eternal, connected to the earth. Fontingall Yew does not give bark for anyone, only those of its own type.”

“Marina knows Daddy,” Luna says, staring down at her garlic-infused toadstools thoughtfully. “The Ollivanders make all of the Lovegood wands. They keep our secrets.”

“We keep everyone’s secrets. With that in mind,” Marina gestures to the shield. “Perhaps we could lower this?”

“Not yet,” Harry gives Marina a long look. “What’s my wand core?”

“Phoenix feather,” Luna answers. “Everyone knows that.”

“They do, mate, the Triwizard Tournament,” Ron winces apologetically.

“Okay then,” Harry narrows his eyes at Marina. “Which phoenix?”

“You are a suspicious young man but I imagine it is warranted,” Marina shifts her basket on her arm. “The familiar of Albus Dumbledore.”

“Tell me what I want to know about that familiar,” Harry prompts.

“It gave only one other feather,” Marina says quietly. “For Lord Gaunt’s wand.”

“And here I thought that was a deep in the vault secret, Harry,” Ron shifts uncomfortably.

“She knew,” Harry shrugs and drops the shield.

“It is a secret that shall bear no relevance when you find your true wand,” Marina reminds him, stepping closer and looking down at Luna’s toadstools. “Moon Frogs?”

“Yes!” Luna smiles.

“Hmm,” Marina nods. “They like dragonflies. A pond is a better bet.”

“You’re getting a new wand, Harry?” Ron asks.

“I ... I dunno, I think there’s one out there but ...,” Harry shrugs. “It might be a myth.”

“Hah!” Ron snorts. “I thought three-headed dogs were a myth. Then I met you.”

“I didn’t *produce* the dog, Ron!” Harry protests and Ron snorts with laughter.

“Okay, what about the Basilisk?”

“Again, that wasn’t *mine*!”

“Do you know what it is made of?” Marina asks quietly. “The wand of destiny?”

“Elder, I assume,” Harry says.

“Are you talking about the elder wand?” Ron says with a frown. “That’s just a story for kids.”

“What do you know of Elder?” Marina continues as if Ron hasn’t spoken, beginning to touch the trees around them, knocking some and listening for sounds.

“Um ...,” Harry frowns and thinks about the little he’s managed to learn about Elder wood from reading the mysteries surrounding the Elder Wand. “It’s ... difficult to work with?”

“Impossible,” Marina says.

“It’s holy,” Luna says softly, bending down to rub the oil into the red and white toadstool tops. Ron frowns and then joins in. “Elderberry wine is brewed by Fae at the solstice.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Harry says.

“No one does,” Marina says critically. “You share your secrets very willingly, Fae child.”

“Harry is not other,” Luna says. Ron shoots Harry a worried stare. Harry shrugs and nods to Luna. He trusts Luna. Marina raises her eyebrows, glances at Harry and then looks very intensely at the tree beside her.

“I will not ask,” she says firmly. “I will not think. I will not guess. That is a dangerous secret to have.”

“Good idea,” Ron nods firmly.

“Yeah, smart,” Harry says hoarsely. *I am full of dangerous secrets.* “So ... it’s made of holy wood?”

Marina nods and strokes a hand over the bark of the tree.

“Do you know what the other legendary components are rumoured to be?” She asks.

“There are some fables that say it was never made at all,” Harry frowns, trying to remember what he and Theo have been reading. “That it ... just popped up. Like Excalibur, like magic.”

“The sword was made,” Luna says dreamily. “Nimue’s people forged it.”

“Harry, are you saying Excalibur's going to be your next wand?” Ron stares at him appreciatively. “That would be weird. But *cool*.”

“No, I’m ... I’m not sure what I’m doing,” Harry presses his face into his hands for a second. His headache is starting to come back. “I just ... my wand isn’t *right* anymore. I need to do wand magic, I can’t *just* do heir magic all the time -,”

“You could actually, Harry,” Luna says lightly.

“Not if I want to pass my NEWTS,” Harry sighs. “If I ever even get to do my bloody NEWTS before Tom has my head on a fucking stick.”

“Hey,” Ron’s voice is suddenly sharp. “What did I say about talking that way?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry sighs, too tired to not be honest. “I just ... I don’t know what I’m doing and everything is so fucking weird and I don’t ...” Harry thinks of Dumbledore who is dying in Spinners End and Severus who is racing to save him. “I don’t *have fucking time*.”

Luna slides her hand into his. Instantly, Harry smells cold water, her magic drowning him in calm. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. Inside his mind, he sees a wide lake, dark and deep and shiny as glass. He tastes its freshness, the sting of rushing air on its waves. He opens his eyes and looks down at their joined hands. His bones are gold. Luna’s skin is leafy. Ron is watching them both carefully, his eyes darting towards Marina and then back again.

“Is this something you want to be doing in public?” Ron asks lowly.

“Marina keeps the secrets of the Fae,” Luna says dreamily.

“Harry’s not fae,” Ron says forcefully, gently pulling their hands apart.

“No, he’s not,” Marina reaches into her basket. “I have something I was intending to send to you, Mr Potter. I intended to write it into a letter under the moonlight for a blessing but I see it was destined for other paths.”

She hands Harry a piece of parchment. He recognises her handwriting and shoots Marina a look.

“I hand wrote a copy from the Hereford library and translated it myself from Ancient runes,” Marina says. “Read it aloud.”

Harry shoots Ron a stupefied look but he shrugs, and so Harry reads:

They came together upon the summit and there Morgana Le Fey first saw the pale horses without their riders. Death came before Mryddin and told him ‘They shall guard the Wixen who have seen my path as it crosses and they shall be like the beast that rides the dead away.’

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. With it,

she buried Mryddin and gave to Arthur Pendragon Myrddin's sword with which he would rule the land.

“He died,” Harry whispers. He looks up at Marina. He feels as if something is twisting inside his chest. He remembers Merlin's fears of Uther and Mordred, he remembers Merlin's hesitance to listen to Oldest and Deepest inside Excalibur. He remembers it because he dreamt it but he *remembers* it too as if he were there, and now he feels afraid. “No one said he died that way.”

“What did I tell you, Harry?” Luna whispers. “When you worried you were him come again?”

Harry remembers sitting on the roof of the Burrow, asking Luna desperately if he was the reincarnation of Merlin. He swallows hard.

“You said we are not them,” Harry whispers back. “We are not their mirrors. We are of that which made them but we are ourselves.”

“Yes,” Luna nods sagely and squeezes his hand again. This time, no gold bones or green leaves appear. “Your path is not his path, Harry.”

Harry tries to feel comforted but he stares at the words: *his life spent upon the field of battle*. Harry wonders if there could be a more apt description of him. After all, his whole life has been a fucking battle.

“No soul returns from the veil,” Marina frowns at Harry. “I know muggles believe that they do, that souls can live many lives but wixen do not. Did no one tell you this?”

“Yeah, Luna did,” Harry nods, remembering Luna's words. What Marina is saying would be more comforting if he hadn't wandered back out of the veil of Charon two months ago.

Only you, Master, Death whispers in his ear.

“In school they don't teach this,” Ron frowns and looks at the parchment over Harry's shoulder. “It's not in any of the story books I read growing up, either. Nothing like this. They say that Merlin and Morgana and Nimue won and Arthur became King of the muggles and Morgana was his wixen advisor. They don't even say Merlin ever died, they say he's sleeping and he'll wake -,”

“Perhaps he shall, perhaps not, this is one account of a myth that cannot be verified,” Marina says dismissively. “But take note of what the weapon is made of.”

Harry looks back down at the parchment, trying to dismiss his own sense of unease, but he can hear Death's voice in his ear: *we are coming, Master*.

“Elder wood, horse hair -,”

“Not horse, Harry,” Luna whispers. “What can we see but others can't?”

Harry's stomach lurches.

“Thestral hair,” Harry corrects himself. He thinks of Prongs, of the strange form he has grown into and then pushes on. “And Merlin's ... bone.”

He looks down at his arm where the gold is still lingering like a sheen over the skin, even if its no longer glowing. *Expect to be changed, Master*.

“Of the three of them,” Luna whispers. “The wand made of three.”

Merlin, Morgana and Nimue. Dee, Shelley and Kelley. Me, Theo and Luna. Harry feels like there are other threes, that there is a three in the pattern he is missing.

The names, Master.

“What does that mean?” Ron asks.

“I don’t know,” Harry whispers. He looks up at Marina who is watching him carefully.

“I do not See, I do not know, I can only tell you this,” Marina offers him her hand and Harry takes it. She turns it over and traces the lines of his palms, the golden glow quickly dissipating into Harry’s skin. “There is no wand anyone could now make you that would choose you, Harry of Merlin.”

Except me, Death whispers. Harry swears he feels her cold breath on his neck.

“Well then,” Harry says quietly. “I guess I had better find it.”

Severus leaves Albus in his study in Hogwarts, still miraculously alive after hours of rune sequences, potions and healing that has left Severus sweaty and frazzled. He tries not to think of Harrison’s solemn announcement that Death was close. Severus hopes he has done enough to beat her back and yet, even as the night wanes, his work is not done. He floos to Skye, his head reeling. *Albus knows about Draco. Albus wants me to kill him.* He stands in the dark of the small living room, breathing heavily, Albus’ words shooting around his head.

Certainly not. You must kill me ... I daresay the moment will present itself in due course ... You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation ...

Severus seizes an empty coffee mug from the coffee table and throws it into the fireplace, letting it shatter. *How fucking dare he.* Severus has wished Albus dead and has even promised to take his life already to save Draco but this vow that he has made is another tether between him and Albus and it cuts Severus like a garrote. It was one thing to wish Albus dead for Harrison’s sake, it is quite another to promise the man an easy way out at Severus’ hand. *How easily he makes me a murderer. How easily he plays dice with my life and future.* He breathes heavily, trying to contain a scream that is desperate to get out but before he can, he sees something move out in the garden in the shadow of the new dawn. *Lupin,* Severus thinks. Possibly full of pain from his transformation and bleeding out on the lawn. In a second, Severus has rushed to the door, too caught up in Albus’ words to consider the foolishness of his actions. If he had, he might have anticipated the fact that there is a wolf in his garden. There is a *werewolf* in his garden.

“Idiot,” Severus whispers to himself. “You absolute fucking idiot.”

The dawn may be rising but the moon has not yet set. It is faint and glowing in the slow rising dawn but still there. Severus is about to go back inside and slam the door, hoping that his scent has

not been caught by the monster at the end of his garden but then he sees the wolf cock its head, curiously, sniffing the air. Severus freezes. It gives him a moment, more than a moment, to stare at the beast. Severus has seen Lupin in wolf form twice. Once, directly after his transformation under the weeping willow and limbs absurdly stretched and horribly violent. The first time, a fleeting glimpse at the end of a tunnel, of fiery eyes, burnished fur and gnashing teeth. Both times, Severus realises, Lupin was without wolfsbane. Now, he is different.

The wolf before him is not recently transformed nor wildly rabid. Consequently, it no longer looks like a horrible humanoid canine, standing on hind legs and panting wildly. It has settled into its form, which is undoubtedly oversized and unusual, but it is not ... hideous. The enormous wolf has reddish fire and large, flaming eyes. They are undoubtedly wild and breathtakingly animal but at the same time, familiar.

“Remus,” Severus breathes. The ears of the wolf twitch. It doesn’t growl or bare its teeth, simply steps back, shaking its enormous head. It is such a typically Lupin gesture that Severus cannot help the soft snort of derision because of course, even in the body of a raging beast, the mind of Remus Lupin will want to protect him from this. “It is alright. I shall not come closer.”

The wolf whines gently stepping further back. Severus can see that his fur-covered limbs are beginning to tremble. He looks up at the sky, at the moon that is thinning, paling out against the rising blue morning.

“Is it time?” Severus takes an unconscious step forward and the wolf growls, lowering itself to the grass, its ears pressed back. Then growls become whimpers and Severus knows what is coming. He turns and rushes back into the house, grabbing a blanket and the pain potion that Lupin has lined up ready on kitchen counter. Severus winces as he hears howls and panting, a grinding, crunching sound of bones that makes him feel nauseous. When he reaches the doorway, there is a naked man lying limply on the lawn. *I expect to live half as long as you ... a rib doesn't reform when I transform and stabs me in the heart ...*

“Shit,” Severus is across the lawn in second, heart pounding as he rolls Lupin onto his back, wincing at the broad slices across his stomach (clearly from some kind of animal brawl) but Severus can see the cuts are shallow. He casts a diagnostic spell and grimaces at the result. Severus decides then and there that he will perfect a flawless wolfsbane in his lifetime. Something that strengthens the bones and the heart for the transformation, something that ensures Lupin will not die. At least not this way.

“Sev,” Lupin mumbles, his eyelashes fluttering. “Shouldn’t ... be here ...”

“Hush, idiot wolf,” Severus presses the pain potion against Lupin’s lips, supporting his head to help him drink. Lupin swallows wearily and flops back, unconscious again. Severus is not surprised. What surprises him is that Lupin is not screaming with the pain of having dislocated and relocated nearly every joint in his body. Sighing, Severus wraps Lupin in a blanket and begins to pull his limp form into his arms. Lupin stirs.

“I can walk,” Lupin slurs. “I ... I can manage ...”

“Yet I am here so you do not need to,” Severus snaps. Standing up with Lupin in his arms, he carries him a little unsteadily back into the house and through to the small bedroom. He lowers his lover onto the bed and Lupin moans softly. Severus sets to work on the shallow cuts on his chest washing and gently bandaging them to keep them clean. When Severus lowers Lupin’s head back down onto the pillows Lupin’s face is creamy white and slack, his breath coming in sharp, rapid

gasps. Severus frowns and casts a diagnostic spell again but sees there is nothing to be done. Lupin is whole, there is no bone to mend, no lung to clear of fluid. His body is simply full of pain and exhaustion and all Severus can do is ride it out with him. So Severus kicks off his boots and shrugs off his robes. He is sweaty and sticky but too tired and worried to consider showering. He climbs into the bed, pulling the duvet up over Lupin and lying down carefully beside him, not too close in case Lupin is in too much pain to even be touched. But then Lupin rolls over onto his stomach, flopping half of his body over Severus' and pressing his nose into Severus' neck, breathing deeply, still growling with that rumbling base tone of the wolf.

"You saw me," Lupin mutters. "I could smell you."

"I did." Severus does not know what to say. The last time he saw Lupin in wolf form his reaction had been to get the man fired. The time before had been fear and betrayal unlike anything else. Severus does not know how to reassure him that this time, nothing has changed. "You didn't hurt me."

"I ... couldn't," Lupin yawns. "My ... mate. Could smell you."

Severus knows what to say to that even less. He remembers Lupin's words from long ago: *I could find you in a damp forest*. He sighs and hesitantly begins stroking the man's back.

"Does this hurt?" he whispers.

"No," Lupin mumbles. "*f'anwylyd cariad*."

Severus has no idea what it means. He presses a kiss to Lupin's sweaty forehead.

"Go to sleep," he whispers. Lupin huffs like a dog and rubs his nose against Severus skin. Severus even feels a damp tongue pressed there, as if some instinct of Lupin requires him to groom him. Usually, Severus would not endure such nonsense but since the man is barely conscious he merely rolls his eyes and stares at the ceiling, waiting for Lupin to fall into a heavy slumber. He lies like that for several hours re-writing the recipe for wolfsbane inside his head. *More ginseng to lessen inflammation in the muscles ... filings of unicorn horn for additional bone strength ...* When the clock on the mantelpiece strikes for 8am, Lupin wakes, taking in a sharp breath and lurching upwards out of sleep in a panic.

"Peace," Severus touches his back gently, aware that in the hours between transformations the wolf has at least fifty percent of Lupin's mind, if not more. "You are safe."

"Sev," Lupin's wild eyes find his. He swallows and winces, his voice is gravelly. "Why ... where's Harry?"

"The Burrow," Severus knows he needs to ease into his news otherwise Lupin might leap up and head for England before he's finished his sentence. "Do you want tea?"

"Yes," Lupin says automatically and then closes his eyes tightly. "Pain."

"What kind of pain?"

"Head, actually," Lupin opens one eye a crack. "Think I might have knocked it around a bit last night."

“Here,” Severus rummages in his robes for the custom headache reliever he has made for Harrison and always carries on his person. Lupin throws it down with shaking hands and then looks at Severus with wide eyes.

“That is remarkable,” he whispers, staring at the small glass vial in his hands. “It’s instantaneous. This is ... this is the one you brewed for Harry?”

“Fast acting but not long-lasting,” Severus warns. The potion was made specifically for Harrison’s own cycle of nightmares, something that would take his pain away and let him fall back to sleep quickly. He rises from the bed. “Tea?”

“Peppermint,” Lupin says, still staring at the vial in his hands. Severus nods and goes out to the kitchen. It is grey, the dawn light barely whispering through the windows. The room is dusty, looking unloved as all homes do when they have been empty a few months. Severus sets the kettle to boil and pulls down mugs from the cupboard. He opens the kitchen window and reaches out to pluck mint leaves from the plant growing outside the window and grabs a few sage leaves whilst he’s at it. He hears a shuffling noise and Lupin walks slowly into the kitchen. He’s pulled on a jumper and a pair of tartan pyjama trousers and he grips the doorframe and counter as he moves stiffly to one of the wooden stools.

“Should you be up?” Severus asks.

“If I don’t get up I’ll be stiff tonight,” Lupin’s voice is hoarse. “It’s much worse to transform a second time when I’m stiff.” Severus pours hot water over leaves and pushes the mug towards Lupin.

“Sage too?” Lupin sniffs.

“It’s anti-inflammatory,” Severus pours hot water onto instant coffee and sips, wincing at the astringent, stale taste. Lupin blows on his tea.

“I thought you were coming here the last morning of the moon, on Saturday,” Lupin says.

“I was.”

“Then what happened?” Lupin’s eyes are suddenly sharp. “You said Harry was okay.”

“He’s fine,” Severus takes a deep breath. “Albus is dying.”

Lupin pauses.

“Excuse me?”

Haltingly, Severus explains. Lupin’s eyes, which still seem so much brighter than usual, never blink or leave his face. It’s a little unnerving but Severus imagines it is a holdover from his wolf form.

“So he knows about Draco’s task,” Lupin takes a tentative sip of his hot tea. “How did he find out?”

“I did not tell him,” Severus shakes his head. “But he has always had an uncanny ability to predict the Dark Lord’s habits, and he must have known that Lucius’ ascendancy would not be without cost.”

“He really asked you to do it?” Lupin says.

“Oh yes,” Severus smiles mirthlessly. “He wants a quick, painless exit, apparently. *This one great favour*, he called it.”

Lupin breaks the mug. It doesn’t smash, only cracks and hot water gushes out over Lupin’s hand but Severus is there, snatching the mug away and muttering a repairing spell before all the tea can escape.

“Here,” Severus grabs Lupin’s hand and turns on the tap, twisting the faucet so the cold water flows over the burned skin. Lupin is growling, a low-level rumble of displeasure like a disgruntled dog.

“*One great favour*,” Lupin grinds out. “As if we haven’t given him everything he’s ever asked for. As if we haven’t given our fucking lives for all this.”

“You are tired,” Severus breaks the tip off the aloe plant that sits behind him on the windowsill and rubs the cool gel inside it against Lupin’s red hand. “Your wolf is far too close to the surface. We will save this conversation for later.”

“Severus, do you really believe my indignation on your behalf is only a product of lycanthropy?” Lupin grips his hand with wet, slimy fingers. “Have some fucking sense.”

Severus feels the corner of his mouth lift, wryly. He had forgotten that when Lupin is close to the moon, he does not seem to have the mental energy to hold back his acerbic tongue. He had forgotten how magnificent it is, to see the glimpses once again of the boy who was always too smart and too quick for everyone, as he was before he hid himself away behind shame and apologies.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because you are rude,” Severus says honestly. He turns to the kettle and refills Lupin’s mug.

“And *you* see fit to comment on that?” Lupin’s eyebrows shoot up. “You are canonically rude, Severus, you are thematically rude and all of it is frankly fucking *odd* given that the latin root of the word, *rudis*, means to be uncultured and you are one of the most cultured people I know. So that in itself is a rudeness, your ability to utterly corrupt of the genealogy of the word by being so categorically impolite.”

Severus wants to grin. He will not grin.

“Tell me, when did you decide that this -,” Severus gestures to Lupin. “- was too much?”

“If I am meant to understand that sentence you will have to either elucidate or rephrase,” Lupin mutters, eyes narrowed. Severus purses his lips so he doesn’t smirk.

“When did you decide that being the cleverest person in the room, being the quickest mind and sharpest tongue, was something shameful that you must hide behind a veil of perpetual affability?” Severus says. Lupin stares at him. Severus tries not to smile. “There. I both elucidated and rephrased.”

“Smug bastard,” Lupin sips his tea and stares at Severus. Still, he does not blink. Severus no longer finds it unnerving. It is oddly comforting, as if he knows that he is being watched *over*; rather than

merely watched. "If you must know, it was when you left me."

"I did not leave you, you lied to me," Severus says quickly. Lupin rolls his eyes.

"We were fourteen, Sev, I think we can split the differences now, don't you?" Severus bristles at this but nods curtly. After all, he has other priorities in this conversation.

"Why did you change?" He asks bluntly. "You were dazzling."

Lupin looks at him for a long, hard second.

"Come here," he says softly.

"Why?"

"Because my legs hurt too much to move and I want to kiss you."

Severus rolls his eyes and leans forward over the counter but Lupin shakes his head.

"Come here," he commands, more firmly. Severus thinks it would be impossible to refuse him, still he takes a long sip of coffee, holding Lupin's gaze, before slowly moving around the counter to lean against it, beside Lupin. Lupin watches, eyes tracking him and as soon as he is within grasp, surges up to kiss him ferociously.

"I thought your legs hurt too much to move," Severus gasps.

"To move, yes, to stand, no," Lupin's hands are tugging fiercely at his hair but Severus does not care.

"That is a distinction within a distinction," Severus kisses him back, firmly, desperate to feel how alive he is after seeing him so vulnerable and fatigued. Then Severus pushes him back down onto the stool. "Do not tire yourself."

"Do not pity me," Lupin hands have moved to his hips and his fingers dig in, punishingly as he twists so Severus is standing between his parted legs.

"Yes, of course that's what it is," Severus drawls. He runs his thumbs over the planes of Lupin's upturned face, watching his eyes flutter closed. Wolves do not purr, Severus knows this, but there is a particular rumbling sound that Lupin occasionally makes when Severus touches him like this that makes Severus think of a tiger, rolled on its back, purring in the sunshine. "You didn't answer my question."

"Werewolves cannot be aggressive," Lupin murmurs. It doesn't sound like a fact, it sounds like something that he has been repeating his entire life.

"Who told you that?"

"My parents," Lupin sighs heavily. "After the incident with you and the shack, they came to school for a meeting with Albus. I was told it was even more important that no one ever suspect I were ... different. They explained how, no matter what I felt, I must never show my temper because eventually, people would find out. It was not a secret that could be kept forever. When they did, I had to be able to say I had never once, not ever, been aggressive with anyone."

“You fought in a war,” Severus thinks this is an obvious counterpoint but Lupin shakes his head.

“It’s not the same thing,” Lupin sighs. “People can accept monstrosity in certain conditions that are to their benefit, war meets those conditions. But if people think I am rude, if I am abrasive, if I lose my temper, then they see a monster that will harm them.”

“You were never sardonic and scathing because you are a werewolf,” Severus frowns down at his lover. “You were astonishingly intelligent and lesser minds frustrated you.”

“British wixen don’t want werewolves to be astonishing people,” Lupin murmurs, a spasm of despair crossing his face. “They want us to be docile, safe, average human beings. It is the only way we are tolerated. For if we are more than a beast once a month, if we are faster or stronger or yes, even smarter, all of the time, then we are threatening. They see a beast out of a cage and it frightens them.”

“But you do not think that any more,” Severus says slowly. “Or you would never have become a Creature Ambassador.”

“No,” Lupin opens his eyes. They are full of fire and victory. “Harry is too extraordinary. He needs extraordinary people to guard him. You are already extraordinary. I can give you both no less than my everything. Not if I want to keep up.”

Severus feels the oddest clenching inside his ribs, as if they are being squeezed together. Oddly, all he can think of is the first time he ever told anyone he loved them. Lily, in the shadow of their tree in Cokeworth. *I love you too, Sev.*

“You do not keep up,” Severus twists the werewolf’s golden-red locks in his fingers. “You surpass me, Remus.”

Lupin tilts his head towards Severus’ palm and presses a kiss to it. His lips are warm.

“I think no one can surpass Harry,” he says quietly. They both know that this is both true and dangerous. “He definitely has the Slytherin magic back?”

Severus nods. He would recognise those green, sparkling jolts of energy anywhere.

“Then he is only getting more powerful,” Lupin muses, sipping his tea. Severus stares at Lupin’s hair between his fingers, casually admiring the red and gold but also thinking about Harrison knowing that Albus’ time was limited. A part of him wants to share it with Lupin but he knows Harrison’s judgement is right. The shape of Lupin’s beliefs and grief is so different. He will not understand and until it becomes necessary for him to know, Severus will not tell him something that could jeopardise Lupin’s relationship with Harrison. “You told him yes?”

“Hmm?” Severus looks at the wolf.

“Did you tell Albus you would kill him?”

“I did.”

Severus does not tell Lupin that he has already promised with an unbreakable vow to fulfil this task. Lupin has so much of Severus, perhaps even most of his heart, but Severus is still Lord Prince. *Negahbane raaz*. There are secrets to guard. There will always be secrets to guard.

“We can’t tell Harry,” Lupin says. Severus raises his eyebrows. This is not what he expected. Although Lupin has pulled away from Albus, understandably, Severus expected at least an inch of squeamishness for the notion of Severus murdering him. Perhaps it is the moon but Lupin is staring past Severus’ elbow with a slight frown on his face. “Not about your promise to Albus or Draco’s task.”

“Agreed,” Severus says. “But he does know that Albus is dying.”

Lupin hesitates with his lips on his mug and looks into Severus’ face.

“How did he take it?”

Severus hesitates. He remembers running out of his front door to see Harrison cradling Albus in his lap, a truly broken expression on his face, trembling from head to foot as he told Albus that he would be fine. Severus couldn’t deny the terror there.

“I believe he worries for the implications of Albus’ demise,” he says slowly.

“Don’t we fucking all?” Lupin snorts into his mug. “You said a year?”

“At most,” Severus corrects. “I can keep working on a curse control potion but with the time it takes to develop -,”

“And Draco’s timeline?” Lupin presses, eyes bright.

“I am unsure,” Severus sighs and looks at the bright morning sun that is starting to cast a glow over the sofa and desk from the other window. Out of it, he can see the white light reflecting off the water. “But I cannot imagine the Dark Lord will wait more than six months.”

“Then we have six months,” Lupin says, his voice quiet.

“Six months.”

Six months to prepare his godson to murder the greatest living hero of Wixen society, or six months to prepare to do it himself. Severus sighs wearily and sips his coffee. He wishes, more than anything, that Harrison were here, sleeping in his little bedroom and that Severus could know for sure that all the people he loves are safe around him. *I’ve seen what happens to the people you love*, Snivellus, Black’s voice echoes in his mind. Severus takes another sip of coffee and buries that voice behind an avalanche of snow in his mindscape. He knows it will never last. It will thaw and melt and the things that Black said to him, the cruel, true things, will always resurface.

“Do you need to go back to Hogwarts?” Lupin’s hands wrap around Severus’ back, drawing him close so Lupin can rest his head against Severus’ chest. Severus combs his hands through Lupin’s tumbled, slightly sweaty curls. He does need to go back to Hogwarts. He needs to be available in case Lucius calls and he needs to check on Albus.

“No,” Severus sighs and cradles the back of Lupin’s head close. “I can stay.”

Dumbledore's dying.

How long?

Severus says a year.

Are you okay?

No. It's not long enough. I don't even know what I'm supposed to be ready for but I know I won't be ready.

Yes, we will. We'll be as ready as we can be.

I'm not ready to ... to fucking face Tom again.

Facing him is not the same as beating him.

Then how the hell do we beat him?

I don't know yet.

Yet.

Yes, yet. I promise you, we will work it out.

And we'll be together.

Always.

END OF PART TWO

Chapter End Notes

The story continues in part 3! Follow the link to “next work.” To stay in touch, please follow me on the following platforms and join the discord.

Go well, friends, until we return.

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

Writer: Insta: [@elphreads](#)

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Website: [emmahinds.com](#)

Join the Heir to the House of Prince discord: add elphie at elphie#4157

PREVIEW - Part 3

Chapter by [elph13](#)

Chapter Summary

Part 3 is now UP and available, simply follow the link to 'Next Work' to begin chapter one and make sure you subscribe to both the series and the work so that you get all the necessary updates! Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

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

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 flooded 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.

**CONTINUE READING PART 3 in THE HEIR TO THE HOUSE OF PRINCE PART 3 -
THE LAST NECROMANCER**

Chapter End Notes

Hey gang! I just put this up so those who haven't subsribed to the series won't miss anything!
See you in part 3!

Welcome to the Heir to the House of Prince community!

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Go well, friends!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!